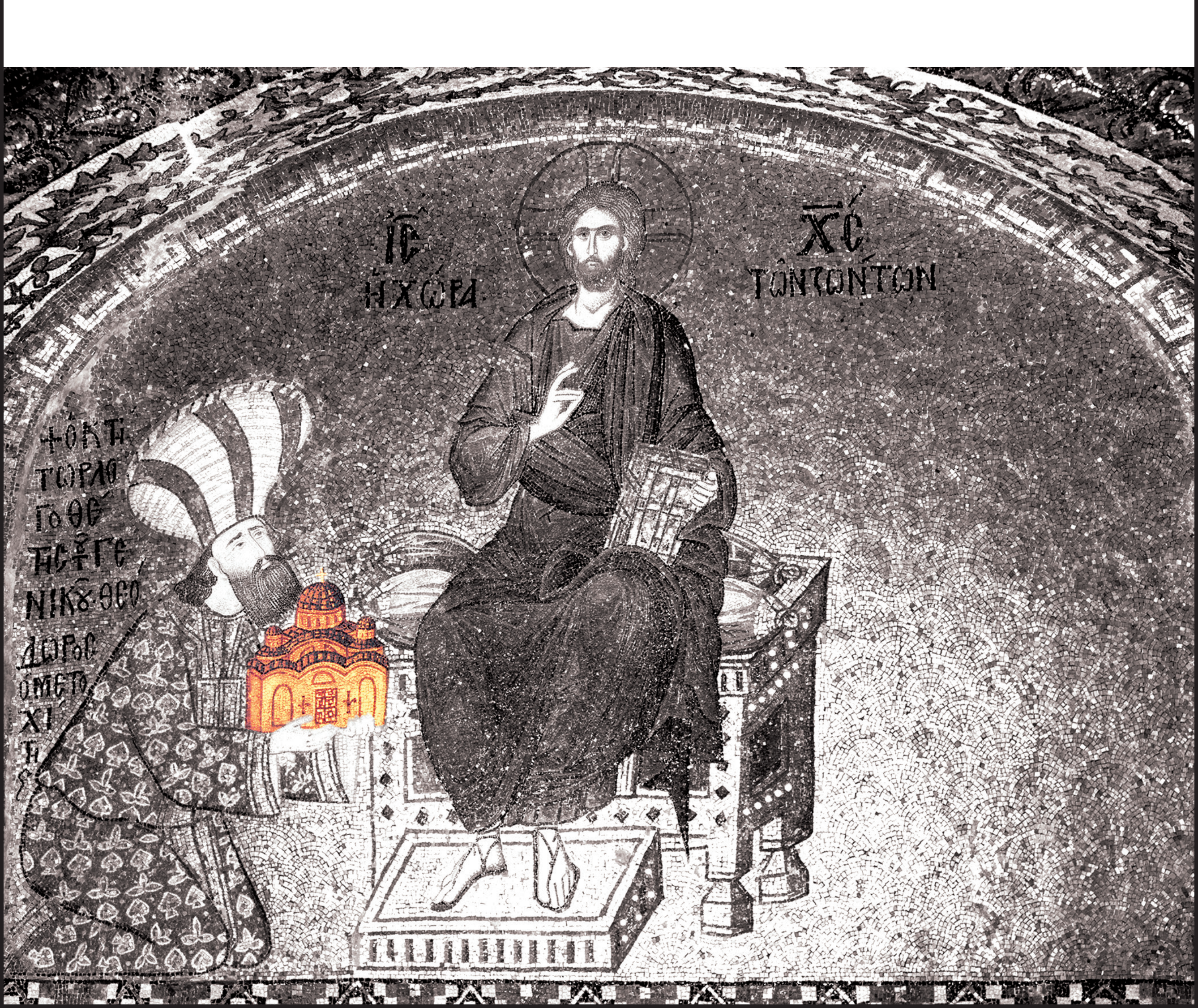
Donor Portraits in Byzantine Art

The Vicissitudes of Contact between Human and Divine

Rico Franses



Donor Portraits in Byzantine Art

This book explores the range of images in Byzantine art known as donor portraits. It concentrates on the distinctive, supplicatory contact shown between ordinary, mortal figures and their holy, supernatural interlocutors. The topic is approached from a range of perspectives, including art history, theology, structuralist and post-structuralist anthropological theory, and contemporary symbol and metaphor theory. Rico Franses argues that the term "donor portraits" is inappropriate for the category of images to which it conventionally refers and proposes an alternative title: contact portraits. He contends that the most important feature of the scenes consists in the active role that they play within the belief systems of the supplicants. They are best conceived of not simply as passive expressions of stable, pre-existing ideas and concepts, but as dynamic proponents in a fraught, constantly shifting landscape. The book is important for all scholars and students of Byzantine art and religion.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06–04/06, Singapore 079906

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108418591
DOI: 10.1017/9781108290517

First published 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International Ltd. Padstow Cornwall

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Franses, Rico, author.
Title: Donor portraits in Byzantine art : the vicissitudes of contact between human and
divine / Rico Franses, American University of Beirut.
Description: New York : Cambridge University Press, 2018. | Includes bibliographical
references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018025219 | ISBN 9781108418591 (alk. paper)
Subjects: LCSH: Portraits, Byzantine. | Benefactors in art. | Byzantine Empire – Religious life
and customs.
Classification: LCC N7592 .F73 2018 | DDC 709.02/14–dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018025219

ISBN 978-1-108-41859-1 Hardback

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Illustrations

Acknowledgments

I offer grateful thanks to the many teachers, professors, and colleagues who have exerted an influence on this book, either indirectly, by changing my way of thinking about the subject, or directly, by reading and commenting on earlier drafts, or, indeed, by doing both. These include George Galavaris†, Robin Cormack, Glenn Peers, Charles Barber, Liz James, Jas Elsner, Antony Eastmond, Antony Cutler, Margaret Mullett, and Robert Nelson. Thanks too to the rigorous but anonymous readers at Cambridge University Press, and to Father Joseph Munitiz who, a long time ago, shared with me his thoughts on the Byzantine afterlife, as well as his invaluable card index on the topic.

In the complicated task of gathering photographs and permissions, special thanks go to Maria Vassilaki and Vassiliki Dimitropoulou, who both went well beyond the call of duty in this regard. Dr. Dimitropoulou also provided assistance with Greek editing. Further help with photographs was provided by Alyson Williams, Reader Services Librarian at the Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, and Julia Gearhart of the Visual Resources Collection, Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

Support for various aspects of the research and publication of the book has been provided by the Office of the Dean, Pratt Institute, New York, and by the Office of the Dean, American University of Beirut. Many thanks go to them as well.

Finally, I add my name to the long list of authors who have expressed their grattitude to Michael Sharp and the team at Cambridge University Press for the extraordinary work that they do in bringing books to fruition.

Introduction: Methodologies for the Study of Donor Portraits

In Byzantium and lands under Byzantine influence, those who had constructed, repaired, decorated or redecorated a church, or commissioned a manuscript or an icon, often had themselves represented in or on that object, together with the holy figure to whom the commission was dedicated.[1] In many of these images, the patron presents the holy figure with a model of a church building or a manuscript; thus Theodore Metochites in the Kariye Camii (Church of the Chora) in Istanbul offers his church to Christ (1316–21, Fig. 0.1).[2] Similarly, Leo, in the frontispiece to his famous Bible, offers his book

[1] For a general listing of monumental donor portraits, see T. Velmans, *La peinture murale byzantine à la fin du moyen âge* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1976), chapter 2, "Un témoignage sur la société: les images des contemporains." A comprehensive listing of manuscript donor portraits can be found in I. Spatharakis, *The Portrait in Byzantine Illuminated Manuscripts* (Leiden: Brill, 1976); special credit must be given to this work, which, although limited to manuscripts only, constitutes the single most detailed study of donor portraits yet published. Although we will have occasion to dispute several of Spatharakis's conclusions, the book itself is a monumental accomplishment that maps out many of the key issues pertaining to such scenes. For donor portraits in specific geographic locations see the following: A. and J. Stylianou, "Donors and Dedicatory Inscriptions, Supplicants and Supplications in the Painted Churches of Cyprus," *Jahrbuch der Österreichischen byzantinischen Gesellschaft* 9 (1960): 97–127; S. Kalopissi-Verti, *Dedicatory Inscriptions and Donor Portraits in Thirteenth-Century Churches of Greece* (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1992); L. Rodley, *Cave Monasteries of Byzantine Cappadocia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); C. Jolivet-Lévy, *Les églises byzantines de Cappadoce: le programme iconographique de l'abside et de ses abords* (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1991). For icons with donor portraits at St. Katherine's Monastery in Sinai, see G. and M. Sotiriou, *Icônes du Mont Sinai*, 2 vols. (Athens: Institut Français d'Athénes, 1956–58). Other significant publications that deal with these portraits are J.-M. Spieser and E. Yota (eds.), *Donation et donateurs dans le monde byzantin; Actes du colloque international de l'Université de Fribourg (13–15 mars 2008)* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer,2012); N. Ševčenko, "The Representation of Donors and Holy Figures on Four Byzantine Icons," *Deltion tes Christianikes Archaiologikes Etaireias* 17 (1994): 157–64; N. Ševčenko, "Servants of the Holy Icon," in C. Moss and K. Kiefer (eds.), *Byzantine East, Latin West: Art Historical Studies in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 547–56; A. W. Carr, "Donors in the Frames of Icons: Living in the Borders of Byzantine Art," *Gesta* 45 (2006): 189–98; D. Mouriki, "Portraits de donateurs et invocations sur les icônes du XIIIe siècle au Sinaï," *Études balkaniques* 2 (1995): 103–35; and K. Marsengill, *Portraits and Icons: Between Reality and Spirituality in Byzantine Art* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

[2] P. Underwood, *The Kariyeh Djami*, 4 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), vol. I, 14–16. See also N. Ševčenko, "The Portrait of Theodore Metochites at Chora," in J.-M. Spieser



Figure 0.1: Theodore Metochites before Christ, mosaic in inner narthex, Kariye Camii, Istanbul, 1316–21.

to the Virgin (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, Reg. gr. 1, fol. 2v, 930–40, Fig. 0.2).[3]

However, it is not always the case that patrons make an offering of this sort; often, they are simply shown in a gesture of reverence toward the holy figure. Sometimes such figures will appear standing with hands raised in prayer, as do Constantine and Maria Akropolites in the lower left and right corners of the revetment of a Hodeghetria icon in the State Tret'iakov

and E. Yota (eds.), *Donation et donateurs dans le monde byzantin: Actes du colloque international de l'Université de Fribourg (13–15 mars 2008)* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2012), 189–206, and R. Nelson, "The Chora and the Great Church: Intervisuality in Fourteenth Century Constantinople," *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 23 (1999): 67–101.

[3] *Miniature della Bibbia Cod. Vat. Regin. Greco. 1 e del Salterio Cod. Vat. Palat. Greco 381*, Collezione Paleografica Vaticana 1 (Milan: Hoepli, 1905); S. Dufrenne and P. Canart, *Die Bibel des Patricius Leo,* facsimile with introductory volume (Zurich: Belser, 1988); P. Canart (ed.), *La Bible du Patrice Léon. Codex reginensis graecus 1: Commentaire codicologique, paléographique, philologique et artistique*, Studi e testi 436 (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2011); T. Mathews, "The Epigrams of Leo Sacellarios and an Exegetical Approach to the Miniatures of Vat. Reg. Gr. 1," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 43 (1977): 43–133; Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 7–14.



Figure 0.2: Leo before the Virgin, Leo Bible, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, Reg. gr. 1, fol. 2v, 930–40.

Gallery in Moscow (late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, Fig. 0.3).[4] Often, too, these giftless figures bow in *proskynesis* – for example, the monk Manuel, now barely visible at the base and slightly to the right of the Virgin's throne, in the apse fresco of the Church of the Panhagia Mavriotissa in Kastoria in Greece (thirteenth century, Fig. 0.4).[5]

As the inscriptions that accompany many of these images make clear, the lay figures in the scenes always have one thing in mind above all else: salvation on Judgment Day. The inscription of Leo is overt in this respect: "I . . . present as a profession of faith to God and to the Mother who gave birth and Theotokos only this Bible . . . in remission for my sins."[6] Many other inscriptions express the same idea in the more laconic forms of *deesis tou doulou sou*: "this is the request (or petition, or entreaty) of your servant," and *Kyrie boethie doulou sou*: "Lord help thy servant."

These images are well known within the Byzantine corpus, yet they have not been the subject of intensive examination. This is no doubt largely because they seem, at first sight, to be entirely transparent. We understand what the supplicant wants (salvation), and how it can be obtained (by giving a gift or by entreaty). However, this study seeks to demonstrate that almost all of the ways in which the images seem to make sense to us are, at best, misleading, and that other, more complex, issues are always afoot. The book presents an argument for a new understanding of the images themselves.

These scenes are unusual in the Byzantine repertoire in that they show an interaction between contemporary figures, real characters living their lives at the time that the scenes were executed, and the hallowed spiritual figures so familiar to us from the rest of Byzantine art. If, to use a modern analogy, we think of the painted surface as a screen on which the images are projected, then donor portraits appear as though the audience has clambered into the picture, to engage with the holy figures in the scene.[7] It is this

[4] I. Bruk and L. Iovleva (eds.), *Gosudarstvennaia Tret'iakovskaia galeria: Katalog sobraniia*, 3 vols. (Moscow: Skanrus, 1995), vol. I, no. 166; H. Evans (ed.), *Byzantium: Faith and Power (1261–1557)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 28–30.

[5] S. Pelekanides and M. Chatzidakes, *Kastoria* (Athens: Melissa, 1985), 66–83; A. Wharton Epstein, "Middle Byzantine Churches of Kastoria: Dates and Implications," *Art Bulletin* 62 (1980): 202–57, at 202–06.

[6] Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 10.

[7] This thought is inspired by, but not identical with, Nancy Ševčenko's opening of her "Close Encounters: Contact between Holy Figures and the Faithful as Represented in Byzantine Works of Art," in A. Guillou and J. Durand (eds.), *Byzance et les images: cycle de conférences organisé au musée du Louvre par le Service culturel du 5 octobre au 7 décembre 1992* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1994), 257–85, at 257–59, in which she makes reference to the Woody Allen film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985). There, in a "film within a film" sequence, an actor steps out of the "inner film" into the "outer film." This is the reverse of what I have in mind, where the audience "in reality" steps into the diegetic space of the image.



Figure 0.3: Constantine and Maria Akropolites in the lower left and right corners of revetted icon of Hodeghetria, State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow, late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.

interrelationship between contemporary, lay supplicants and holy figures, as represented in the pictures, that forms the primary thematic focus of this book.



Figure 0.4: Monk Manuel before Virgin and Child and Angels, painting in apse, Church of the Panhagia Mavriotissa, Kastoria, thirteenth century.

The significance of this interaction, and the uniqueness of the images, can be gauged in several different respects. Unlike, say, icons of holy figures, donor portraits are not dogmatic, loaded with theological content and proclaiming eternal truths. Yet neither are they like the narrative scenes that we find elsewhere in Byzantine art, as for example, representations of Christ's life, purporting in some measure to retell a historical event as sanctioned by scripture or long tradition. They are perhaps best described as economic, in the sense that they deal with the contingencies of the way in which specific lay individuals interact with the world of the spirit. They thus pose one of the fundamental questions of religion, which concerns not just theology as a description of the spiritual world, but of how theology plays out at the level of the single human individual. These scenes speak not in the third person, as do narrative or dogmatic ones, but in the first person. They imagine an encounter from the viewpoint of the person within the picture, and it is this perspective that we will be pursuing.

The book poses one key question of the portraits: what do they mean? However, this question itself is subdivided into two additional, overlapping questions: what do they mean, in the conventional sense of the word "meaning"; and, further, what do they do? In reference to the first of these, as mentioned above, the scenes are much more complex than they initially appear to be, and our investigations will reveal several new features in this respect. In addition to this question of meaning, however, the book argues that the images themselves force on us a further distinction, which concerns the issue of the particularly active role that they play.

Whatever questions art history typically poses of the pictures that are the subjects of its inquiry – for example, history, development, influence, iconography, relations to society and religion – one aspect that was, until recently, not much studied is the way in which pictures might be active, performative agents. Perhaps the most straightforward illustration of this idea may be found in the Gregorian dictum of pictures as books for the illiterate. From the point of view of iconography (which is one of the standard art-historical ways of thinking about meaning), a picture of the Anastasis, for example, refers to a sequence of events that happened after Christ's death. A detailed analysis of different representations of the scene might demonstrate different conceptions of those events, and might, for example, bring out different aspects of the relationships of the component figures to each other; this would form a good part of the meaning of the scenes in question.[8] In addition to this, however, and unrelated to it, would be their function in instructing the faithful about what happened – "unrelated" here in the sense that all of the features of meaning are taken to be properties of the images themselves, as though inhering within them, irrespective of whether they are being used for instruction or not.

It is no doubt true of all images that they are active beyond what has conventionally been considered meaning, and this in ways that are much more complex than simple instruction. However, within the world of religious imagery, the active role is particularly prominent. There has not been much discussion of this distinction between meaning and doing in relation to Byzantine art; however, it is fair to say that in recent times a shift has occurred in scholarship away from the former and toward the latter, often in the form of viewer response. As an example of this, we may take Charles Barber's work on icons, where he investigates what an icon

[8] For the "books of the illiterate" discussion, see C. Chazelle, "Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate: Pope Gregory I's Letters to Serenus of Marseilles," *Word and Image* 6 (1990): 138–53. For the Anastasis, see A. Kartsonis, *Anastasis: The Making of an Image* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

does, in terms of what effects it produces for the viewer; it is a "directed absence" that "maintains [the] desire" of the beholder.[9] In other words, the images are also functional, have real consequences in the world.

Even within this universe of activating images, however, the argument is made in this book that donor portraits are unusual in the degree to which they are dynamic and operational. They play complex roles within the much larger economy of overall religious belief systems. The stress here is thus on the productive, functional role of these images, conceived of not as passive bearers of meaning, but as active proponents within a larger field of endeavor.

As we will discover, however, what the image means (in the conventional sense of the word) is an essential component in how it goes about doing what it does. The book thus studies the images from both angles. The first is the attempt to understand what they mean in that conventional sense; here we might say that the images are the end-point of the mode of inquiry. The second, however, reverses the model, and investigates what effects the images have; here the images stand at the beginning of the mode of inquiry. Both are essential in attempting to arrive at an understanding of the portraits, and the book makes the argument for expanding the sense of the meaning of the images beyond the conventional passive sense, to include this active function as well. Indeed, this active role, in several different contexts, must be highlighted as the most distinctive feature of the images, and the most important component of their meaning.

In relation to the conventional sense of the meaning of the images, the aspect of contact between human and divine to which this book is dedicated has received very little attention.[10] Primarily, it has been the lay figures themselves who have been the main focus of attention, considered from two different perspectives. One of these, following a dominant model of art history over the last several decades, has investigated the figures in relation to their status within society. The portraits have thus been studied for their witness to social evolution and changing patterns of patronage.[11]

Yet it is also the case that the lay figures have been the focus of attention in another sense as well – not in their function as representatives of a social group, but simply as individuals. In the scholarship on these images, there is an endless fascination with the person of the lay figure. The reason for

[9] C. Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 121; C. Barber, "From Transformation to Desire: Art and Worship after Byzantine Iconoclasm," *Art Bulletin* 75 (1993): 7–16, at 15.

[10] A notable exception here is Nancy Ševčenko, in "Close Encounters."

[11] See for example S. Tomeković-Reggiani, "Portraits et structures sociales au XIIe siècle," in Association internationale des études byzantines, *Actes du XVe congrès international d'études byzantines, Athènes, 1976*, 4 vols. (Athens: n.p., 1980), vol. II, 823–35.

this is not difficult to divine. In the first place, as portraits, they represent the individuals who inhabit history, single people emerging from the otherwise faceless wash of time. Everywhere, portraits personalize history, giving us a sense of privileged access to individuals, and apparently linking us back to the past with immediacy. Correspondingly, the standard practice when dealing with these images has been to attempt to augment this sense of individuality by identifying the supplicants, and to correlate the scene with as many other facts as are known about their lives. The inevitable pull of a portrait is always toward the historical identity of the person, and scholarship yields to this attraction as well.

This fascination is so great that examinations of these images often entirely ignore the fact that they show the presence of both lay and holy figures, and simply treat them as though they were single, individual portraits. These scenes thus come to be subsumed under the broader category of "The Portrait" in general, and examined in that capacity alone, rather than in their specificity as representations of an interaction between a set of characters. It is a striking fact that although there is no single study devoted to these images themselves, the studies that do exist on the portrait consist largely of examples drawn from their ranks.

In addition to this, however, there is another, more subtle, reason for the focus on the individual persona of the supplicant at the cost of any serious consideration of what is at stake in the relationship between lay and divine. It lies in the already-mentioned apparent transparency of the scenes themselves, where no complex problems of interpretation present themselves. The scenes thus appear entirely clear and comprehensible, the mechanisms in play within them barely requiring any comment. Further, within this apparent transparency, everything, once again, leads inexorably back to the supplicant; the images seem to be so assertively "about" the lay figure, about his or her motivations and desires. The meaning of the image thus seems to coalesce around the supplicant, and he or she appears to hold the key to its not-very-deep secrets, and to be the main bearer of signification in the scene. Any investigation of the picture is therefore inevitably drawn to a more profound excavation of the person's individual circumstances and intentions. The more that can be learned about who that person was, the more we believe the image to have been elucidated.

Although it is of course true that behind every commission lies the story of an individual life lived, one of the aims of this study is to put into abeyance our certainties about meaning. One of the key questions posed is how meaning comes to be located in an image in the first place, and Chapter 2 investigates in detail this concentration on the person of the

donor. The argument is made there that, although the exact role of the patron is highly complex, the most important factors determining meanings lie elsewhere, and the focus on the patron is misleading.

As an illustration of this point, we might regard the personal explanation of the images, the one that looks at individual circumstances, as a response to the question "Why is this particular supplicant asking for help? What has he or she done that assistance is needed?" But, as we will argue, there are other essential questions to be posed of the scenes. The first should be, "Help from what? What is the impending disaster?" And the second should be, "How can help be delivered, and what form might it take? What effect would it have?" Although the answers to these questions might seem self-evident – the answer to the first is "judgment," and to the second it is "forgiveness" – upon examination, the issues turn out to be anything but simple. And the nature of the answers in turn affects how we, or, more pertinently, supplicants themselves, understand the images. Thus, to give but one small example, a request for help "means" something quite different if it is addressed to a merciful God than if it is addressed to a vengeful one. What the scene means, therefore, will be different according to the nature of the specific scenario with which supplicants consider themselves to be engaging. What is more, that scenario is determined not by the supplicant, but by much broader, preexisting cultural and religious frameworks within which the supplicant is enmeshed. In this respect, it may be seen that the question of meaning transcends the individual, and the current study focuses instead on those broader frameworks that are the essential determinants of the scenes.

Once we escape the trap of the personal and start thinking of the larger issues that render meaning to these scenes, two principal areas emerge. The most important one, overarching all the others, is the broad, yet also very specific, religious context that sets up the parameters with which the portraits engage. Here, the single most influential factor is the Byzantine conception of the afterlife. In the first place, the afterlife is the place and time at which the supplication embodied in the portrait is aimed, in that it is there that the success or failure of that supplication will be played out. Even more than this, however, the afterlife is where the nexus of interlocking points formed around the ideas of salvation, sin, and sin remission, all elements of crucial importance to the dynamics (and hence the meaning) of the portraits, are given their fullest expression. It is in connection with the afterlife that we will discover the largest number of variants that inflect our understanding of the scenes.

In addition to these issues, which are strictly religious, a further key field underpins the main group of portraits we will be studying: those where

a church or book is given to the holy figure. In that a gift is given and a request is made in connection with that gift, the interaction looks very much like what the discipline of anthropology knows as social exchange, or gift exchange. Although in this context, the exchange is playing out in the religious field, anthropology stresses that the phenomenon is, first and foremost, a social activity, governed by strict rules and codes. Once again, as is the case with the afterlife, where a large-scale, preexisting apparatus is already in place, the meaning of the interaction that we see in the portraits is predetermined by these broad social structures into which the supplicant inserts himself or herself.

A further field of operations that also undergirds the images is one that is again religious, and it is situated on an even deeper level. Beneath the tales of the afterlife and the processes of exchange, both of which, in a sense, constitute a narrative, lies an initial, primary event that is almost pre-narrative in character, and which goes to the heart of the scenes: the simple juxtaposition of mortal and spiritual figures, the bringing together of the two distinct worlds to which each belongs. This subject is one that already lies at the heart of religious imagery in general (not to mention religion itself), and was the subject of sophisticated inquiry within Byzantium. These considerations, too, underlie the scenes, and affect the ways in which they are to be understood.

As soon as one begins an examination of these broader areas, however, a number of problems arise. Everywhere the supplicant turns within these preexisting fields that must be negotiated, he or she is caught in a maelstrom of assertions, imperatives, claims and counterclaims, arguments and counterarguments, all pulling in different directions. What might otherwise be considered background context, it so happens, is neither mere background nor context. It is a fraught, charged zone within which the supplicant is trying to chart a course that is inevitably uncertain and unsteady. And, to make matters even more complicated, as we shall see in Chapter 2 in relation to the afterlife, in certain circumstances the individual is called on not only to choose between competing claims, but to adhere equally to two positions that are, in fact, in contradiction with each other.

The question of contradictory structures of belief at large within society and culture is the subject of the book *Outline of a Theory of Practice* by Pierre Bourdieu.[12] Bourdieu stresses in his work that contradictions such as these are an integral element of the systems of culture. They are

[12] P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

productive, strategic devices that are part and parcel of culture itself. This study follows Bourdieu in regarding these contradictions not as limiting features that compromise and impede the functioning of society and culture, but rather as enabling factors that generate new, and no less viable, cultural formations and dispositions. The way in which belief systems are constituted and sustained by certain self-opposing features within them thus forms a sub-theme of this book.

Once we recognize the overall field within which the portraits are situated not as monolithic and stable, but as inherently criss-crossed with clashing concepts that strain against each other, the question of how to understand the images themselves changes. The argument will be made that they themselves participate in the strategic maneuverings that make up the culture to which they belong. As we will see, they play a crucial role within this world of shifting contentions, navigating between them, and, in certain key circumstances, intervening to resolve the most thorny of contradictions.

This status of the images as role-playing agents returns us to the distinction drawn earlier between meaning and doing. Here we see that the investigation of meaning itself, once viewed as something produced within a clamoring, jostling field, compels us to turn our attention to the "doing" aspect of the images too. As noted earlier, the portraits are not simply passive carriers of fixed, preordained meaning within a stable field, but are active, functional components within a contested field. In this respect, they intervene as dynamic, productive elements within belief systems, generating new conceptual configurations, modes of thinking, and structures of belief.

In outline, then, this book is structured as follows. Chapter 1 consists of a broad survey of the category of images generally known as donor portraits. It does not aim to provide a comprehensive listing of all such images, but rather serves as an introduction to, and critical assessment of, the field. In the first instance, it examines the history and development of these scenes, and the history of scholarship on the subject. Further, the field itself consists of a large, heterogeneous group of images that is ill-defined at the margins, and some preliminary classificatory work is therefore necessary. Using detailed visual analysis, the chapter proposes certain core characteristics of the scenes. Once these are applied to the field at large, however, certain surprising results emerge. The first is that the nomenclature of donor portraits itself is inappropriate for the images conventionally covered by the term. An alternative title for the category – contact portraits – is proposed. Key subgroups of the category, defined by the already-

mentioned distinction between those scenes that show a patron bearing a gift and those that do not, are also identified. The book primarily studies the group of images showing a donation, although it does deal with the other group as well.

The second surprise is that many images that have informally been considered to form part of the category of donor portraits, or are frequently investigated along with them, should not be included within the category. Several other genres exist showing lay figures together with holy figures, but not all of these qualify as contact portraits. A careful examination of all these scenes allows us to refine our understanding of the essential elements of all the genres.

Beginning the inquiry into the meaning (in the passive sense of the term, as outlined above) of the contact portraits, Chapter 2 engages broadly with questions of the individual agency of the supplicant in relation to that meaning. As many modern debates have shown, the issue of the determination of meaning is anything but simple, and this chapter reconsiders the question in the context of Byzantine art historiography. The chapter lays out an argument as to why the pull toward the supplicant as fulcrum of meaning should be resisted. However, rather than simply dismissing the supplicant, it also attempts to understand exactly what his or her role is in the overall constitution of the meaning of the image.

The chapter examines its subject through the lens provided by one specific image, the "Emperor in *Proskynesis*" mosaic in the Church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul (see Fig. 2.1). The image has evoked enormous academic interest over a long period of time, and a large body of scholarship exists around it. A detailed analysis of that scholarship allows us to pose some fundamental questions in relation to meaning itself. These include, "Through what procedures has meaning conventionally come to be ascribed to the image?" and "What kinds of explanations and discourses have traditionally counted as meaning?" The chapter goes on to propose alternate mechanisms for this process of "coming to meaning," thus laying the conceptual foundation for our further explorations of the subject in the rest of the book. The chapter also reconsiders the image itself in the light of the issues discussed, and proposes some alternative routes for its interpretation.

Subsequent chapters differ in their methodology from Chapter 2 in that they move away from the case-study model of examining principally one image. These chapters, rather, turn their attention to the key factors that, in line with the alternate processes and kinds of meaning mentioned above, constitute the structural underpinnings of the scenes. As such, they focus on the common features of the category of donor portraits, as deduced and

defined through detailed visual analysis in Chapter 1. In this respect, the conclusions reached apply to all the images, and are not limited to any single individual scenes.

The afterlife, examined in Chapter 3, without doubt constitutes the topic closest to the hearts of the supplicants. The chapter begins by analyzing several of the discourses surrounding the afterlife. It discovers that the field that constitutes this time-period is divided into two conflicting conceptions of what supplicants will find there, one harsh and punitive, the other benign and merciful. Contact portraits are then considered in terms of their relation to each of these conflicting sides, and the chapter demonstrates that this relationship to the conflict in the afterlife is the key element that determines almost every aspect of the meaning of the scenes. This issue of the relationship of the images to that conflict thus forms a key theme of the book, and is pursued in all of the following chapters as well.

Further, it is in connection with the discourses around the afterlife that some of the most flagrant tensions and contradictions mentioned above are to be found. The chapter excavates the core structures that are involved in these issues, and investigates the way in which they mark supplicants as they prepare and execute their petitions. It is in this chapter as well that, as we pursue the question of meaning, traditionally construed in its passive sense, so we are inexorably led to the active role that the images play within broader structures of belief. This active role quickly dwarfs those conventional questions of meaning, and comes to be the dominant issue pursued, again, in all the following chapters.

Chapter 4 examines the topic of exchange. Utilizing primarily structuralist and poststructuralist theories of gift exchange drawn from the field of social anthropology, the chapter looks at the particular exchange that is articulated by these images. In recent years, the subject of the gift in relation to Byzantine art has received ever-increasing attention, within which a major strand may be distinguished consisting of the work of Cormack, Cutler, Walker, and Hillsdale. The primary focus of these studies has been gift exchange within diplomatic settings, and all the above authors have made profitable use of the major theorists of social exchange theory.[13]

[13] See R. Cormack, "But is it Art?" in J. Shepard and S. Franklin (eds.), *Byzantine Diplomacy: Papers from the Twenty-Fourth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, Cambridge, March 1990* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1992), 219–36; several papers by A. Cutler, including "Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab and Related Economies," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 247–78; "Uses of Luxury: On the Functions of Consumption and Symbolic Capital in Byzantine Culture," in A. Guillou and J. Durand (eds.), *Byzance et les images: cycle de conférences organisé au musée du Louvre par le Service culturel du 5 octobre au 7 décembre 1992* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1994), 287–327; and "Significant Gifts: Patterns of

The current case, however, is rather more complicated. In the first place, the theories as originally articulated deal with exchange and reciprocity between humans alone, as is the case with the diplomatic gifts just mentioned. However, almost no mention is made within those theories of the most salient feature of our portraits, which is the exchange between humans and God. The argument will be made, however, that this latter form of exchange is entirely different from that which occurs solely between humans. Moreover, as we will see, Byzantine Orthodoxy imposes specific, highly delimited restrictions on the way in which exchange between humans and God plays out. Thus, although social exchange theory will be crucial for us in our understanding of the scenes, there is also considerable work to be done in order to establish exactly how the interchange represented within them operates. The chapter also further argues that the specific mode of the interaction that is uncovered in our investigation also plays an essential role in resolving some of the contradictions encountered earlier in relation to the afterlife.

If Chapter 4 looks in general at exchange between humans and God, in the fifth and final chapter we turn to a more literal question raised by the images themselves. One of the truly remarkable aspects of the portraits is that they show the barrier between human and divine being breached, a contact being established across the worlds of natural and supernatural. It is this topic of the interaction between these realms that will occupy us here. A question that arises in relation to this feature is how this contact that transgresses the barrier between the worlds was understood. Was it believed to be literally true? Was it taken in some sense as being symbolic? This question of the reality or otherwise of the contact between worlds is in certain respects always the key issue both of any supernatural system of belief and its accompanying representational practices, but it is brought into particularly sharp focus in donor portraits. The very action of the gift is one calculated to pierce that barrier between the worlds.

Exchange in Late Antique, Byzantine, and Early Islamic Diplomacy," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 38 (2008): 79–101; C. Hillsdale, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy in an Age of Decline* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); C. Hillsdale, "Constructing a Byzantine *Augusta*: A Greek Book for a French Bride," *Art Bulletin* 87 (2005): 458–83; A. Walker, *The Emperor and the World: Exotic Elements and the Imaging of Byzantine Imperial Power, Ninth to Thirteenth Century CE* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). For further literature on gift exchange within the Byzantine and medieval worlds see also W. Davis and P. Fouracre (eds.), *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) and E. Cohen and M. de Jong (eds.), *Medieval Transformations: Texts, Power, and Gifts in Context* (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

The two options mentioned above, of the literally true or the symbolic, however, are the conventional responses to a question of this sort, and they necessarily limit the possible avenues of exploration that might be undertaken in relation to the issues at hand. As this chapter will demonstrate, neither option does justice to the complex set of beliefs that cluster around images of this type. Rather, a more profitable route to pursue, the chapter suggests, is to invert the question and to see the images as providing the groundwork upon which a system of beliefs is erected. The issue then becomes what beliefs, in relation to the question of the interaction between the worlds, are *generated* by the scenes. In this way we come to understand the crucial role that such images play in the ongoing constitution of specific structures of religious belief, and we see once again that the dominant feature of the portraits is their active role.

Finally, the Postscript returns to the issue first raised in Chapter 1 concerning the iconographic distinctions between those scenes that show a donation and those that do not, reconsidering them in the light of the discussions undertaken throughout the book. The focus here is on the very different ways in which each of those iconographies envisages the contact between human and divine. Each carries a distinctive view on the nature of that meeting, on what kind of event it will be, and what is and is not required from the supplicant in order for it to succeed.

1 The History and Problematic of the Donor Portrait

What, exactly, is the iconographic type known as the donor portrait? Although there is not much doubt which scenes represent the core of the type – the examples already noted in the Introduction are perfect instances – the term as it is conventionally used covers a wide range of images. Mention has already been made of a distinction that will play a large role in this study, between those that show the lay figures carrying either a church building or a manuscript and those that do not. However, the full spectrum of scenes that often bear the term also shows other variations that considerably affect their significations. The chief contention of the first section of this chapter is that not all the scenes commonly included in the designation belong there. Once we have better defined the category as a whole, we will turn our attention to its chief characteristics, its emergence and development within Byzantine art, and an overview of the scholarship on the subject.

An indication of some of the issues involved in defining the type is given not only by the images themselves, but by the names by which they are known. English, French, and Italian (to cite some of the languages in which studies on Byzantine art appear) call these scenes donor portraits and the lay figures donors (*donateurs, commitenti*). In Greek and the Slavic languages, however (to cite some of the languages of the places where many of these images originated, and, again, in which many studies are published), although the images are well known, "donor portrait" does not exist. Instead, in these languages, the lay figures in the images are called *ktetor*s, and the scenes go by the name of *ktetor* portraits. The word *ktetor* derives from the Greek *ktaomai*, which in ancient Greek means "to procure" or "to acquire," and by Late Antique times comes to mean "to possess" or "to own."[1] These languages thus know these images as owners' or possessors' portraits.

[1] See the relevant entries in H. G. Liddel and R. Scott, *A Greek–English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); G. W. H. Lampe (ed.), *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); F. W. Danker (rev. and ed.), *A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

Thus, right from the outset, each of these groups of languages adopts an entirely different outlook on the images. Each, in effect, constructs the images in a distinctive way. *Ktetor* focuses on the fact that an object is owned by someone. It thus places emphasis on an almost legal aspect of possession. The donor term, by contrast, stresses that something is given away, released from one's keep. Ownership of an object is relinquished, and is transferred to someone else.

Once we realize this fundamental distinction between the two terms, the differences between them escalate rapidly. If the donor term has connotations of generosity and open-spiritedness not shared by its counterpart, it is also more spiritual and religious. An activity is undertaken for the salvation of the soul, and an interaction, a communication with another being, a supernatural one, no less, is begun. The term *ktetor*, by contrast, concerns primarily the individual and the material objects he or she possesses. It thus pertains mostly to the human realm alone, and is fundamentally pragmatic, utilitarian, and mundane.

Interestingly, if we turn to a detailed study of the images we find some significant variations of iconography that correspond to the distinction that the languages draw. Consider the following range of scenes. The first shows King Dragutin, holding a model of the Church of St. Achilleos at Arilje in Serbia, along with his wife, Queen Katelina, and King Milutin, from 1296 (Fig. 1.1).[2] The second shows the despot Oliver, in the Church of the Holy Archangels at Lesnovo, FYR Macedonia, from 1341 (Fig. 1.2).[3] Oliver here stands next to a figure of the Archangel Gabriel.

If we compare these images with that of Theodore Metochites in the Kariye Camii in Fig. 0.1, at first sight they all seem to belong within one of the categories suggested earlier, that of the gift-bearing scenes. On closer inspection, however, there are some important differences between them. Dragutin and Oliver do not seem to be addressing Christ or Gabriel. Instead, they turn away from the holy figures, outward, toward the spectator. There is thus not much by way of personal contact between the figures, nor is there any real sense of a donation taking place. By contrast, Theodore makes an immense effort to

[2] R. Hamann-MacLean and H. Hallensleben, *Die Monumentalmalerei in Serbien und Makedonien*, 3 vols. (Giessen: W. Schmitz, 1963), vol. III, 26–27. See also S. Radojčić, *Geschichte der Serbischen Kunst: von den Anfängen bis zum Ende des Mittelalters* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969), 42.

[3] G. Millet, *La peinture du moyen âge en Yougoslavie*, 4 vols. (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1959), vol. IV, 13–19. See also Radojčić, *Serbischen Kunst*, 81.



Figure 1.1: King Dragutin, Queen Katelina, and King Milutin, painting in inner narthex, Church of St. Achilleos, Arilje, Serbia, 1296.

establish a link with Christ, to communicate with him. This is visible in the forward tilt of his shoulders, and his head leaning back to peer up at Christ through slightly furrowed brows. It is evident, too, in the way he proffers his church with both hands, thrusting it forward. Dragutin and Oliver, however, simply hold their churches in front of their chests. For Theodore, there is no question but that he is entirely focused on Christ, wrapped up in his relationship with him. There is an intensity in his interaction with the holy figure that is entirely absent from the Dragutin and Oliver scenes.

This difference between the images seems to match exactly the distinction between the Western and Eastern European languages. The Theodore



Figure 1.2: Despot Oliver, painting in narthex, Church of the Holy Archangels, Lesnovo, FYR Macedonia, 1341.

panel, it is safe to say, is a true donor portrait, in that it shows a real offering taking place. The more we look at the Dragutin and Oliver scenes, however, the less they appear to concern a true donation, and the more appropriate the term *ktetor* seems to be. There may not be a connection between the lay and holy figures, but there can be no doubt as to who the owner of the building is. In this respect, the portraits of Dragutin and Oliver seem to be functioning almost as a personal seal, a signature or stamp asserting ownership of the building.

Should we, then, apply only the term *ktetor*, and not donor, to these latter images? In this context, it is also worth considering the iconographic type in which the patrons do not make an offering to the holy figure, as we have seen in the Akropolites figures on the Hodeghetria icon in Moscow, and Manuel in Kastoria (Figs. 0.3 and 0.4). There is some precedent in the literature for regarding scenes of this type as not being true donor portraits. Jónsdóttir, in a discussion dealing with medieval Icelandic manuscripts, yet clearly applicable to our field as well, states that such scenes are "not likely to be pictures of donors, because . . . [they] do not show what they are giving, or whether they

are giving anything at all."[4] Only representations of an actual donation are donor portraits, she maintains.

A hint of the same position appears in the brief article in *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* by Kalavrezou. Although she does not deal explicitly with the problem, she follows much the same route as Jónsdóttir, stating that "He [the donor] was usually depicted holding his gift in his hands," and all of the subsequent examples she gives are of this type.[5] She thus implicitly sides with the view that only "donation iconography" images should be called donor portraits.

If thus excluded from being donor portraits, then, perhaps these images should also be called *ktetor* portraits, along with those of Dragutin and Oliver. There would be a net benefit in classifying all the scenes in this way in that the phrase "donor portrait" would be reserved for images that show clearly and explicitly an offering being made. All the other scenes would go by the name *ktetor* portraits.

Before deciding on this, however, let us return to our starting point in the way various modern languages know these images. Tempting though it may be to associate the differing iconographies seen here with the different terms applied by those languages, we should bear in mind that these visual distinctions are not what those individual words usually describe. Each language group applies its term, blanket-fashion, to all of the images. And in this, there is truth. Each image, Janus-like, faces in two directions simultaneously. Oliver (Fig. 1.2) is certainly pious, just as Theodore (Fig. 0.1) is unquestionably the possessor of his building; we will return to this point shortly for further discussion. Yet it is also the case that in using each of its terms universally for all the scenes, each language grouping blurs the very fine distinctions that the iconography is at such pains to make. Although all images bespeak both themes, they do not do so with equal emphasis.

Further, once we undertake a careful scrutiny of the images, we might also ask whether these two terms that we have been discussing, donor and *ktetor*, are themselves the most relevant categories to apply to the range of images we have so far seen. The image of Manuel in *proskynesis* may not show a donation, and thus, according to our discussion above, should perhaps be termed a *ktetor* scene. Yet even the most cursory of comparisons will reveal that neither does it show ownership or possession in

[4] S. Jónsdóttir, "A Picture of a Donor in an Icelandic Manuscript of the 14th Century," *Árbók hins íslenzka fornleifafélags* (1964): 5–19, at 18.

[5] I. Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, "Portraits and Portraiture: Donor Portraits," in A. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), vol. III, 1705.

anything like the same fashion as the Oliver representation does. Indeed, there is a sense in which Manuel is much closer to Theodore than to Oliver. At the heart of the image is the same urgent desire for contact with the holy figure that Theodore makes manifest. The most relevant distinction to draw in terms of iconography, then, concerns not whether a donation is or is not shown, but whether there is deep personal contact between the lay and holy figures. A better word for all these images might be contact portraits, and the lay figures themselves might best be known simply as supplicants.

In sum, then, the distinction that emerges most clearly from the above discussion concerns images that on the one hand demonstrate ownership, and on the other are preoccupied with contact, irrespective of whether they show the human figures giving a gift or not. Let us reserve *ktetor* and *ktetor* portraits for the former group, and supplicant and contact portraits for the latter. It is contact portraits that are the subject of this book.

Yet it is also the case that even within the group of contact portraits, there are still distinctions to be drawn between the donation and non-donation iconographies. Each pursues the goal of contact in very dissimilar ways, and each functions differently within its own economy of belief. This distinction is of major importance, and is investigated in detail in the book. It makes sense, then, to retain the terms donor and donor portraits, but only for those contact images specifically showing donations. Here we should clarify that the expression "donor portrait" as it is employed in the title of this book and in prior instances up to this point, is used as an umbrella term, referring generically to all the iconographic types so far seen. However, from now on it will refer only to those images that form a subgroup of the new category that we are designating as contact portraits. The second subgroup of this category comprises images such as those of Manuel above, where no donation is shown, but in which the ardent desire for a relationship between the lay figure and the spiritual figure is evident. For want of a better term, we will label this latter group non-donation contact portraits, although we will return to the question of terminology at the conclusion of this study.

This revisionist classification system, distinguishing between contact portraits and its component subgroups on the one hand, and *ktetor* portraits on the other, has several benefits. It distinguishes clearly between those scenes whose primary goal is the putting in play of a distinctive relationship between the lay and spiritual worlds (the chief subject matter of this book) and those scenes where that relationship is not at stake to the same degree. Although there is a superficial resemblance between *ktetor* portraits and donor contact portraits, this classification makes evident that,

at their core, they are very different, precisely in terms of their relationship to the holy figures. *Ktetor* portraits, in a sense, presume that relationship. And, as we will see shortly, *ktetor* portraits also differ in other ways from contact portraits.

It should be stressed that this taxonomy is not conclusive and definitive. Several images (to be discussed further below) do not fit easily into any of the categories proposed, or hover on the borderlines between them. However, by and large, the classification does capture the majority of the scenes in the corpus.

The usefulness of this categorization as a heuristic device is demonstrated if we analyze the images involved from a different perspective, one to which many of the images themselves lead us: that of power relations. If the *ktetor* portraits stress the pragmatic aspect of ownership, this is not the only area where they are engaged with the secular issues of this world. The idea of *ktetor*-ship can also be widened to include a broad concern with the social universe that the patron occupies here on earth. As Oliver's portrait plainly shows, *ktetor*-ship is very much intertwined with the worldly aspects of power, status, and social privilege. Oliver looks entirely regal, proud, and majestic – every inch the king. There is no question that he is a dominant ruler.

An image such as this, showing both ownership and royal power, relates strongly to imperial iconography in general, and a comparison between these portraits and some of the key images in the imperial repertoire proves highly illuminating. Imperial iconography, of course, has as its core purpose the assertion of imperial authority and privilege. Throughout Byzantine history, a steady stream of pictures in manuscripts, mosaics, ivories, and coins proclaimed the supreme rank of the emperor, and declared his almost-godly standing.[6] The clearest statement of this is to be found in the numerous

[6] The best-known explication of this theme is A. Grabar, *L'empereur dans l'art byzantine* (Paris: Les Belles lettres, 1936). See also H. Hunger (ed.), *Das byzantinische Herrscherbild* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1975), and H. Maguire (ed.), *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1997): see especially Maguire's chapter "The Heavenly Court," 247–58. See also A. Beihammer, S. Constantinou, and M. Parani (eds.), *Court Ceremonies and Rituals of Power in Byzantium and the Medieval Mediterranean: Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). On the subject of imperial power, see, amongst a vast bibliography, F. Dvornik, *Early Christian and Byzantine Political Philosophy*, 2 vols. (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1966); H. Ahrweiler, *L'idéologie politique de l'empire byzantin* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1975); M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium and the Medieval West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and, for a view contesting the ideas of many historians of earlier generations, A. Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

divine coronations emanating from the royal palace in Constantinople. An apt example is the dual coronation of John II Komnenos and his son Alexios in a Gospel book of the first half of the twelfth century. Here a close partnership is clearly established between Christ and his earthly counterparts, the emperors (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, Urb. gr. 2, fol. 19v, Fig. 1.3).[7]

Imperial *ktetor* scenes obviously differ in several respects from these coronations; yet, when viewed through the prism of power relationships, they share certain key features. This can be seen most clearly in a three-way comparison between these scenes, imperial coronations, and regular (non-imperial) donor contact images.

In non-imperial scenes such as the one showing Theodore Metochites, there is a standard dichotomy of the weak and the strong, the donor usually appearing in a deliberately submissive position, requesting a favor from the holy figure. At the other end of the spectrum in terms of power differential between participants we find the coronation scenes, such as we have in our Komnenos example. Here, this dichotomy is absent. The image is not built on the binary opposition of power vs. submission, since nobody appears weak within it. Rather, it is concerned with differing grades and types of power. The image articulates these positions through a number of pictorial devices. In the first place, Christ is given the benefit of the uppermost, centralized placement, in contrast to the two emperors, who appear below him, and to the side. Further, the central block has considerable visual mass, as the enthroned Christ and the personifications of Justice and Mercy who whisper the virtues of the emperors in his ears occupy more surface area than either of the two solitary figures beneath.

Yet, against this imposing group, the emperors hold their own. They are not dwarfed by Christ. In their standing posture, they are about a head taller than Christ is seated, making for the clever compromise of appearing to be bigger than Christ within the picture, even though we know that Christ is larger in absolute terms. Moreover, the emperors do not turn to acknowledge Christ, but stand stiff, facing rigidly forward. And not least, their spectacular gold costumes create a display more impressive than Christ's relatively subdued blue robes.

All told, then, by this combination of components, there is no question but that Christ is the dominant figure, yet the two emperors still appear

[7] C. Stornajolo, *Miniature delle omelie di Giacomo Monaco (cod. Vatic. Gr. 1162) e dell'evangeliario greco Urbinate (cod. Vatic. Urbin. Gr. 2)* (Rome: Danesi, 1910); Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 79–83; H. Evans and W. Wixom (eds.), *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, AD 843–1261* (New York: Abrams, 1997), 209–10.



Figure 1.3: Coronation of John II Komnenos and his son Alexios, Gospels, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, Urb. gr. 2, fol. 19v, first half of the twelfth century.

formidably authoritative. Further, the specific action of Christ laying his hands upon the heads of the two emperors narrates how they come to have this power. The gesture signifies an aggrandizing flow of power from the dominant force in the universe to his designated beneficiaries.[8]

This relation of the lay figures to the primal force that is Christ in terms of power is a key factor not only in the coronations, but also in non-imperial donor portraits; yet it also makes the scenes in some senses iconographic opposites. The transmission of power that we see in the coronations generally does not take place in standard portraits. If anything, the reverse is true. Theodore, for example, leans forward imploringly, his brow knitted in consternation, as Christ remains sealed within his own energy field. In the coronation, however, rather than being lessened by their encounter with the ultimate power in the universe, the emperors come away from it with their own status enhanced.

What then of the relative power positions of imperial *ktetor* portraits? These images share some elements of the contact-laden donation of Theodore, but ultimately have more in common with coronation iconography. Here we return to the issue of the dual agenda of these images, as making claims both religious and social, although not necessarily in equal degrees. On the one hand, the scenes wish to derive what may be called a piety dividend for the emperor – he undertakes works for the benefit of the Church, and plays his part in propagating holiness through the construction of holy edifices. On the other, they seek to retain the elevated connotations of imperial iconography, and thus do not wish to submit the emperor to the power drain that a conventional supplicant undergoes in a true donor portrait. Thus the ruler does not engage with Christ or beseech him. To do so would be to show him as less than the powerful force he wishes to be taken for. Similarly, he does not proffer the building to the holy figure. Instead, the scenes adopt some of the same vocabulary that makes the coronations successful: the emperor is upright, frontal, dignified, authoritative, and, not least, bathing in the glow of Christ's blessing. In this way, too, the gesture of holding the model is converted from what, in a true donor portrait, is a symptom of need for help into a sign of possession. The result is an image that primarily retains an aura of command, and demonstrates the forceful activity of the emperor in the world as builder and owner of property. Additionally, however, it does

[8] For a reading of the fine grading of power transmission in this scene and other coronations, see Hillsdale, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy*, 254–63.

convey his piety in founding the church, and he obtains the approval of God for his good deed.

An alternative term to describe these images might be quasi donor portraits, or even, without meaning anything perjorative by it, pseudo donor portraits. They have all the elements of what, at first, appear to be the essential features of a true donor portrait, but these are combined in such a way as to avoid the power imbalance and manifestation of need that are the deliberate and, as we now see, crucial elements of the true donor portrait. Their purpose is fundamentally different. It is not to establish a relationship with an all-powerful Christ whose aid one desperately seeks at the most critical hour, but to impress the observer with their authority.

The relative power positions extant in the three images can also be traced technically within the images themselves, if we look at the scenes not just as static representations of the status quo, but as a charting of movements and flows involving two primary elements, narrative and power. In a true contact portrait, the direction of flow of the narrative begins with the supplicant and passes towards the holy figure. Furthermore, it is a flow that moves up the power gradient, from lesser to greater. In the imperial *ktetor* portrait, however, the direction of address is not from the lay figure toward Christ, but outward, from the emperor toward the observer. Additionally, this direction of address travels along the power gradient inversely from the donor portrait, moving from greater power to lesser. In this, the imperial *ktetor* portrait shows its structural relation to the imperial coronation, where a similar, though even stronger, direction of narrative as well as power flow is established, starting with Christ, passing down through the emperor, and then radiating out over the subject observers.

Thus even though at first sight these imperial *ktetor* portraits look like a species of donor portrait, their closest structural relative is the coronation. It is this difference in the way in which the direction of the narrative and direction of power flow run either against each other or coincide with each other that determines whether an image is a true or quasi donor portrait. In a coronation, the power flow and the narrative, so to speak, compound each other, each amplifying the other. Power flows from the highest point, and infuses the recipient with status. This is imperial iconography at its purest. It speaks not only of the status of the emperor, but is an explanation of that status, telling how it comes to be. The imperial *ktetor* portrait is a muted or mitigated form of the full imperial image. Power still radiates from the lay figure, but we are not told how he comes to be in possession of it. In a true contact portrait, however, whether showing

a donation or not, the narrative subject of the image, the lay figure, has no power coursing through his body. Instead, he is subject to power, a petitioner. This distinctive power configuration, too, is the key criterion for distinguishing not only between true or quasi donor portraits, but between true contact portraits in general and all other images containing contemporary portraits of lay figures together with holy figures.

Many imperial portraits representing donations of one sort or another that would previously have been loosely labeled as donor portraits may also be profitably analyzed in terms of the way in which the power relationship within the image is structured. All show a similar range of concerns to the ones seen above. Some of the most interesting are the well-known imperial panels in the south gallery of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, of 1028–50 and 1118–34 respectively (Figs. 1.4 and 1.5).[9] The earlier shows Zoe and Constantine Monomachos with Christ, the later John Komnenos and Irene with the Virgin. In each of these scenes, the men hold bags of money and the women hold scrolls granting privileges to the church. In this respect, the images are concerned more with sponsorship of the church in an official capacity than with issues of personal salvation that are found in traditional donor portraits.[10] Nonetheless, the problematic of power and contact is dealt with in a distinctive way.

If the Dragutin and Oliver portraits, in their attempts to cross traditional imperial iconography with donor portrait forms, end up looking more regal than humble, the Hagia Sophia panels aim more for the middle ground. In the earlier of these scenes, Christ appears between the empress Zoe and her husband, Constantine Monomachos. He is by some margin the largest figure in the scene, and he sits frontally. Furthermore, the royal couple, less bold, insistent, and assertive than, say, Oliver, turn toward him, and incline their heads respectfully, Zoe more than Constantine. In both these respects, the scene is much closer to a traditional donor portrait. Yet care has also been taken not to undermine imperial authority too much by any appearance of weakness. Once again, the emperors specifically do not proffer their gifts to the holy recipients, even though it would be easy for

[9] On these panels in general see T. Whittemore, *The Mosaics of Hagia Sophia at Istanbul: Third Preliminary Report, Work Done in 1935–1938: The Imperial Portraits of the South Gallery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1942). See also H. Kähler and C. Mango, *Hagia Sophia*, trans. E. Childs (New York: Praeger, 1967), 56–58. Amongst a large bibliography, see also R. Cormack, "The Emperor at St Sophia: Viewer and Viewed," in A. Guillou and J. Durand (eds.), *Byzance et les images: cycle de conférences organisé au musée du Louvre par le Service culturel du 5 octobre au 7 décembre 1992* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1994), 223–51, at 240–43.

[10] For more on this, and on the interrelationship between these scenes and other imperial images in the same church see Hillsdale, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy*, 4–7.



Figure 1.4: Zoe and Constantine Monomachos before Christ, mosaic in south gallery of the Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, 1028–50.

them to do so. Rather, they hold on to the objects in their hands as though reluctant to release them to the custody of anyone else. Here too, the thought of ownership comes more to mind than donation.

In this scene, then, an effort has been made to preserve something of the genuine contact of the true donor portrait, but not so much as to make the emperors seem like petitioners. The resulting image is thus a delicately balanced compromise, highly sensitive to the subtle gradings of power. It is stiff and awkward as it teeters on the brink of showing a true interaction,



Figure 1.5: John Komnenos and Irene with the Virgin, mosaic in south gallery of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, 1118–34.

but cannot quite allow itself to go that far, as it also attempts to maintain the traditional display of royal power.

The later scene of John Komnenos and Irene with the Virgin and Child seems to pass comment on these selfsame issues. Although still operating within the paradigm established by the earlier panel, some small but significant changes have been made. John and Irene are more upright and frontal than Zoe and Constantine, and their size relative to the holy figures has been increased. They appear more impassive, and their royal demeanor is better maintained.

Yet, in addition to this, another change has also been made that seems to indicate a move in the opposite direction. Each figure now makes the gesture of offering more explicit. The gifts are extended farther in toward the Virgin and Christ in the center of the image. And each gift object is indicated clearly by gesture, the outer hand and fingers of each donor stretched out toward it. It is as though the composer of this scene thought that in the earlier panel, not only had imperial status not been given its full due, but neither had the donation.

On balance, however, despite the increased emphasis on the donation, the overall bearing of the royal figures makes it seem as though they are not really giving their objects with any amount of conviction. The image as a whole seems to be withdrawing from the possibilities of contact

established by the earlier scene, and retreating toward standard imperial iconographic tropes. Indeed, we may suggest that it was perhaps possible to render the proffering of gifts more evident precisely because the imperial couple appears to be so confidently august that such a display would not compromise their power.

It is perhaps also the case that the regal appearance of the emperors here, in comparison with the earlier ones, was rendered possible by the fact that in this panel the central figure of Christ has been replaced by the Virgin. No longer having to deal with the thorny problematic of the relation of the two sets of ultimate power to each other (that is, earthly and heavenly), the composer was free to conjure a more dominating image of the emperors, one that the gesture of donation would not undercut.

Each image, then, plays a delicate game, attempting to combine various factors in different proportions in order to achieve a precise, although not equal, degree of power and piety. These scenes, however, are not the only ones demonstrating the overlapping concerns of the worldly and the spiritual. Contact portraits too address these issues in reverse, so to speak, although the difficulties faced by them are far less acute. Being both non-imperial and primarily religious, they do not have to occupy themselves with the difficult issue of the balance between power centers in the image. In these scenes the supplicants know their place exactly, and confess it as such.

So far we have been at pains to differentiate images into categories. It should also be borne in mind, however, that as much as the images fit into these categories, they all have the dual agenda, which means that each also has something of the other categories within it. Even if true supplicants, fervent and humble, seeking contact and the opportunity to deliver a plea, Leo and Theodore are also *ktetor*s, and these images cannot help but speak of social status too. If there is a subsidiary piety dividend for Oliver and Dragutin in their scenes, then there is an equivalent social dividend for supplicants. Simply to appear in these scenes is to declare that one has sufficient funds to found the building, or pay for the manuscript or icon. Then there is also the visual proclamation of one's wealth that an image such as that of Theodore achieves to perfection in its representation of his gorgeous clothes and extravagant hat. Finally, to portray oneself consorting with divine figures is to demonstrate the elevated company that one keeps, and not all in society could afford to represent themselves in this way.[11]

[11] For more on the subject of the interweaving of the two components of the dual agenda in luxury icons, with an emphasis on the social prestige accruing to donors, see T. Papamastorakis, "The Display of Accumulated Wealth in Luxury Icons: Gift-Giving from the Byzantine

In the discussion above we have been concerned with images that, although initially seeming to represent a ruler making a donation to a holy figure, on closer inspection were better labeled as quasi donor portraits or *ktetor* portraits. In Byzantium this is the general rule for imperial images, for the reasons discussed above. There are, however, three more scenes that seem to fall rather more definitively into the ambit of imperial donor or contact portraits that require further examination. Two of these are also in the Church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, the first being the scene already mentioned earlier, the emperor in *proskynesis* mosaic. The second is the Constantine and Justinian panel in the southwest vestibule (see Fig. 1.9). The third scene is to be found in ms. gr. 666 in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, of around 1120. Let us begin with this one.

On fol. 2v of this manuscript, the emperor Alexios Komnenos is represented approaching a seated figure of Christ, extending a manuscript before him in what seems to be a clear gesture of donation (Fig. 1.6). Unlike the previous imperial images of this genre that we have examined, the emperor looks directly at Christ, who returns his look and raises his hand in blessing. There can be no doubt that a close communication is taking place between the two of them. Yet, in terms of standard contact portraits, this image is still unusual. Alexios shows no deference. There is no real request encoded in his body: he shows none of the characteristic bends and folds of the typical supplicant. Rather, he is bolt upright from head to toe, and he does not seem to be asking Christ for anything.

A closer examination of the image makes clear what is happening. The scene is, in fact, not a donor portrait at all. The book that Alexios holds is clearly open, the top edges of the left- and right-hand sides forming a v-shape starting at the spine. Further, the tips of the fingers of Alexios's left hand are just visible curling over the top of the left cover and pages. Indeed, below his fingers we are even afforded a glimpse of the folios, represented in a white color, and thus differentiated from the gold of the book cover. Alexios, it would seem, is not giving the book to Christ, as has generally been thought, but reading to him from it.[12]

The illustrations that appear immediately prior to this scene in the manuscript elaborate on and confirm this interpretation. Fols. 1v and 2r contain a double-page spread. On the left-hand side there is a representation of a row of nine Church Fathers, amongst whom are Sts. John of Damascus, John Chrysostom, and Gregory of Nazianzos (Fig. 1.7).

Aristocracy to God in the Twelfth Century," in M. Vassilaki (ed.), Βυζαντινες Εικονες: Τέχνη, τεχνική και τεχνολογία (Heraklion: Crete University Press, 2002), 35–47.

[12] See, for example, Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 125.

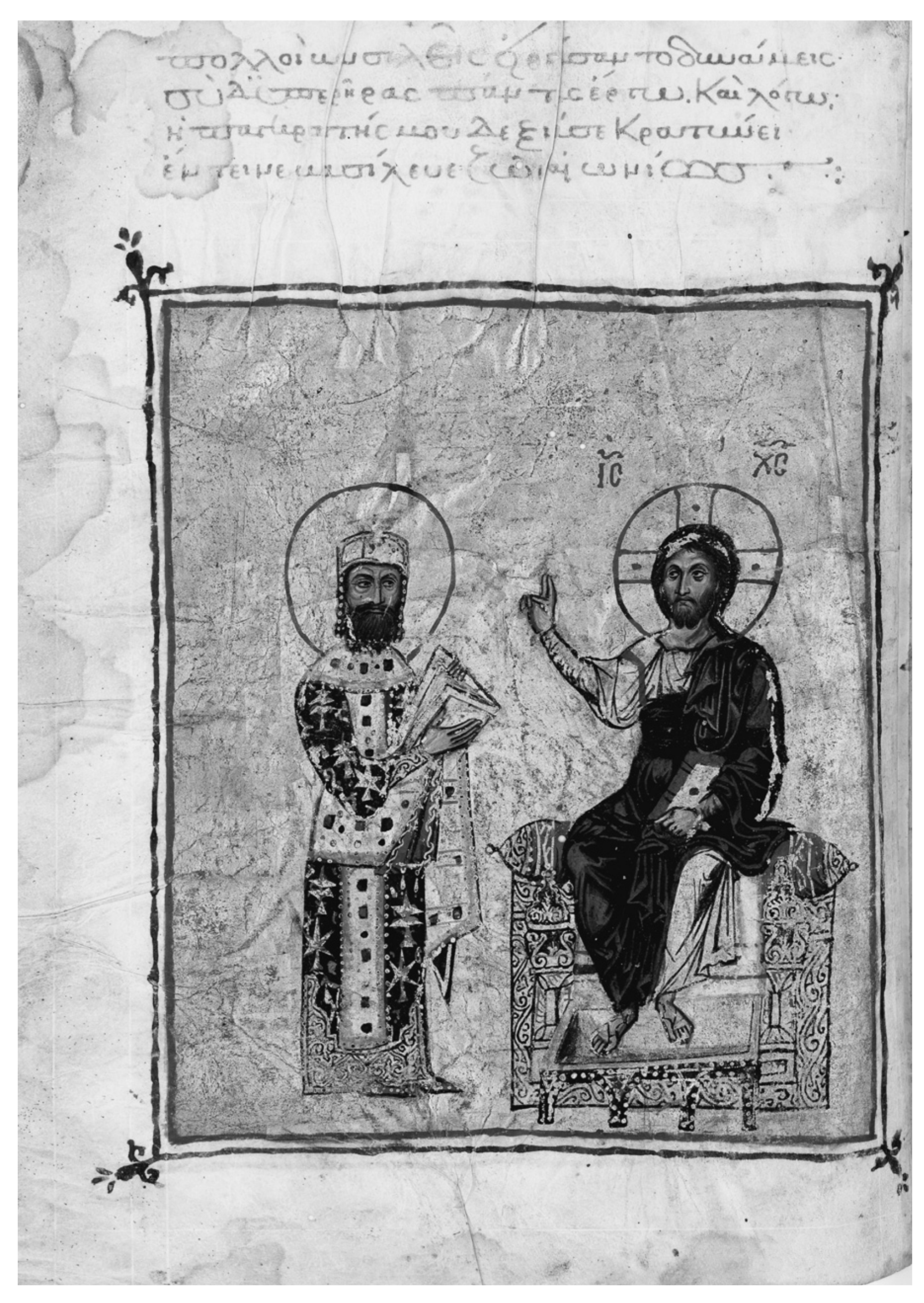


Figure 1.6: Emperor Alexios Komnenos approaching Christ, *Panoplia Dogmatica*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, gr. 666–Synodal 387, fol. 2v, *c.* 1120.

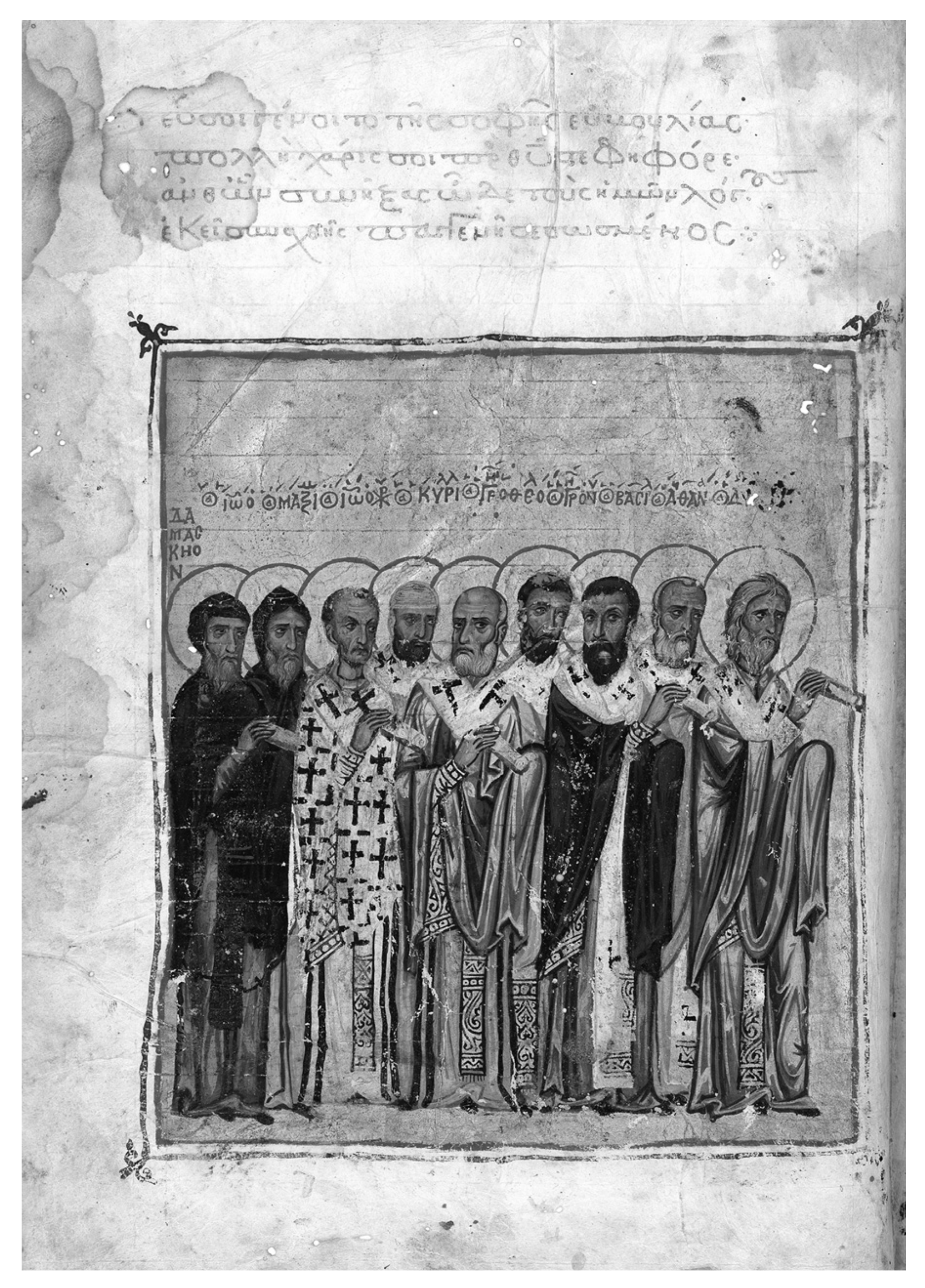


Figure 1.7: Church Fathers, *Panoplia Dogmatica*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, gr. 666–Synodal 387, fol. 1v, *c.* 1120.

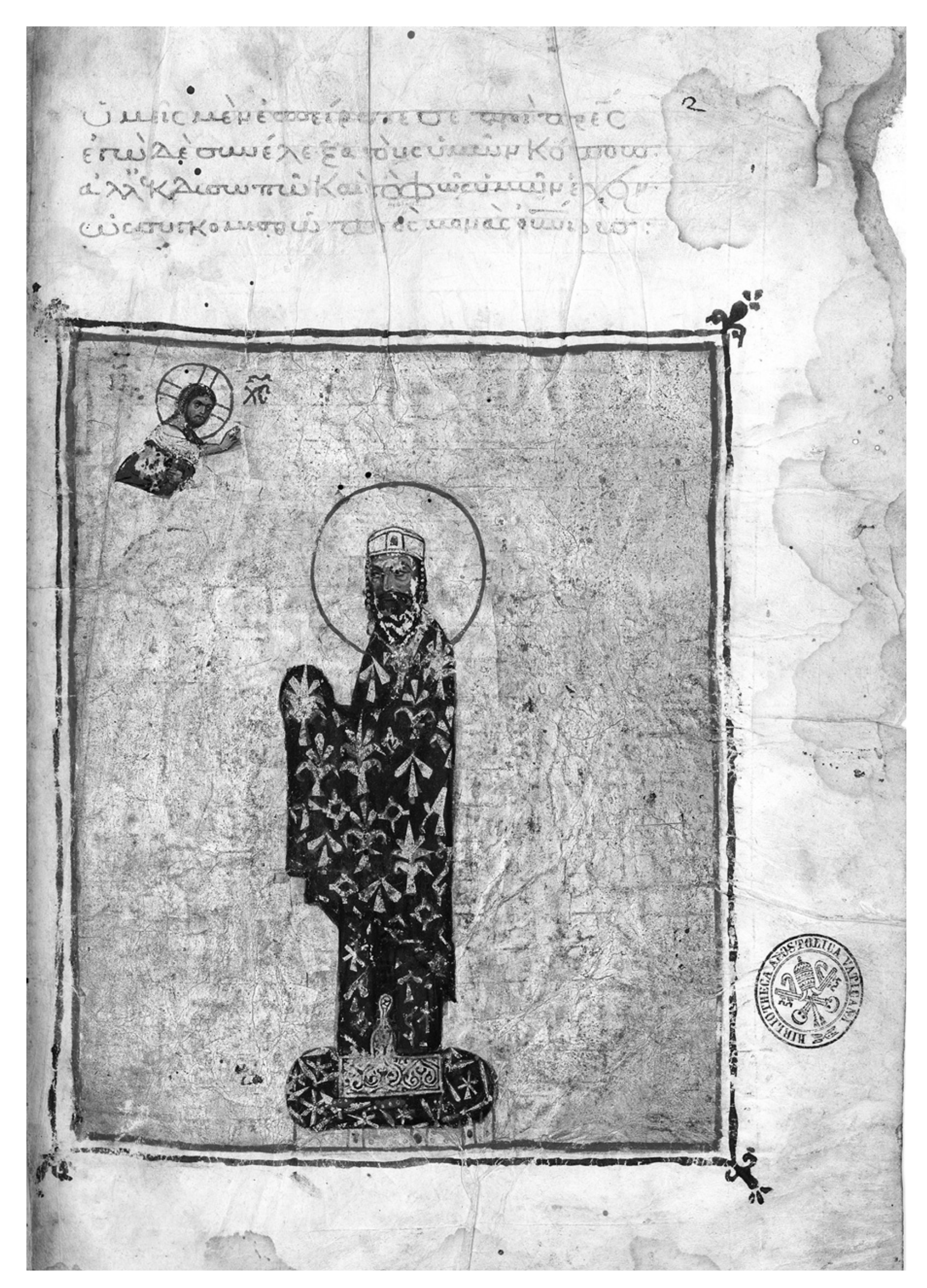


Figure 1.8: Emperor Alexios Komnenos, *Panoplia Dogmatica*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, gr. 666–Synodal 387, fol. 2r, *c.* 1120.

On the right stands Alexios, facing back toward the Fathers and also to a diminutive figure of Christ, who appears above him and to his left, making a blessing gesture (Fig. 1.8). The Church Father closest to Alexios, St. Dionysios the Areopagite, extends a scroll toward the emperor – the front edge of the scroll clearly overlaps the painted frame of the image – who lifts a hand to receive it. Once we notice the gesture of St. Dionysios, we also see that several of the Fathers behind him make a similar gesture with their own scrolls, also proffering them toward the emperor.

Reading the images together, then, they seem to be declaring that the book from which the emperor reads is grounded upon the writings of this most august group of luminaries. In a sense, the earlier scene serves to authenticate the unimpeachable heritage of the volume that appears in the later.

This all makes even more sense when we consider the nature of the manuscript in which these images appear. It consists of several chapters of the *Panoplia*, an anti-heretical work in all likelihood composed at the behest of Alexios himself from the theologian Euthymios Zygabenos.[13] Alexios is thus reading to Christ from this work that he has commissioned, a work that not only attacks heresy, but also is based on nothing but the most orthodox of sources. What had first appeared to us as a donor portrait, then, is rather an image of an emperor asserting to his lord the orthodoxy of his views.

This reading provides a solution to the unusual features that appeared when the image was taken as a donor portrait. The emperor does not have to appear in a pose of humility because he makes no request. Instead, his bearing is filled with authority, and, as is so often the case, the scene as a whole resorts to a series of formal devices to prevent any lessening of it. Christ sits while the emperor stands, yet their heads, and particularly their eyes, appear on exactly the same horizontal level. Indeed, the emperor's fuller beard and gold crown gives him a slight edge in terms of visual

[13] The Vatican manuscript under discussion here is one of two imperial commissions of the *Panoplia* still extant, the other being Mosq. Syn. gr. 387. For more on these manuscripts see G. Parpulov, "The Presentation Copies of the Panoplia Dogmatica (Moscow, Gos. Ist. Muz., Syn. gr. 387; Vatican, BAV, Vat. gr. 666)," *Thirty-Fourth Annual Byzantine Studies Conference. Rutgers the State University of New Jersey October 16–19, 2008: Abstracts* (n.p.: Byzantine Studies Association of North America, 2008). For the Vatican manuscript, see further R. Devreese, *Codices Vaticani Graeci,* vol. III: *Codices 604–866* (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1937–50), 109; P. Canart and V. Peri, *Sussidi bibliografici per i manoscritti Greci della Biblioteca Vaticana* (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1970), 463. For the imperial scenes see also Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 122–29, and P. Magdalino and R. Nelson, "The Emperor in Byzantine Art of the Twelfth Century," *Byzantinische Forschungen* 8 (1982): 123–84, at 149–51.



Figure 1.9: Emperors Constantine and Justinian with the Virgin, mosaic in southwest vestibule, Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, late tenth century.

weight in the crucial area of the face, although Christ's fuller body and throne counterbalance this from the neck down. This is a deeply orthodox emperor, but not a humble one. And he is certainly no supplicant.

If this image is not a contact-donation portrait, then, what of the mosaic panel in the southwest vestibule of the Church of Hagia Sophia, representing the emperors Constantine and Justinian (Fig. 1.9)? In this scene Constantine has in his hands a model of the walled city of Constantinople, in reference to his construction of the city walls, while Justinian has a model of the Church of Hagia Sophia, in reference to his reconstruction of the building. Here, each emperor clearly extends to the Virgin and Child the object that he holds.[14] The image shows none of the

[14] T. Whittemore, *The Mosaics of St Sophia at Istanbul. Second Preliminary Report. The Mosaics of the Southern Vestibule* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936).

hesitations that we have seen earlier. Each emperor offers his gift unreservedly and leans forward respectfully, unafraid to appear in a less than dominant position.

Yet despite this, this scene should not be considered a true donor portrait either. One of the features that we have already seen of contact portraits is that they are usually commissioned by supplicants seeking mercy in relation to final judgment. As Brubaker points out, however, this cannot be the case for the Constantine and Justinian panel, because the mosaic is dated to the tenth century, a minimum of 300-plus years after the death of its most recently living lay figure, Justinian, who died in 565. It is thus not an image in which those represented are themselves seeking forgiveness and salvation.[15]

However, there are also other elements in the image that militate against it being defined as a true donor portrait. It is clear that when the image was executed in the tenth century, it was already laden with historical consciousness in that it refers to times by then long gone. Yet, even had it been done during Justinian's lifetime, there would have been no less of that historical awareness, because the image represents two events (the construction of the city walls and the church) and two personalities themselves divided by several hundred years, Constantine himself having died in 337. Furthermore, the scene establishes a parallel between the two events (each emperor makes the same gesture), and in effect tells us to read Justinian's action through Constantine's. The message that emerges is that just as Constantine engaged in a great public work for the benefit of the citizens of the city, so too did Justinian.

The point to be stressed here is the public nature of their undertakings. It is primarily this that prevents the scene from being a true donor portrait, no matter when it was executed. It documents historical events, and, to be sure, also refigures them by drawing them into a religious setting; these are not just public works, but works dedicated to the Virgin Mary and Christ, as

[15] L. Brubaker, "Gifts and Prayers: The Visualization of Gift-Giving in Byzantium and the Mosaics at Hagia Sophia," in W. Davis and P. Fouracre (eds.), *The Languages of Gift in the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 42–61. Brubaker also argues convincingly that the mosaic should be ascribed to the first half of the tenth century, rather than to the late tenth-century date that has commonly been accepted, after first being proposed by Whittemore. For a detailed analysis of the vestibule itself and its changing relation to the church over time, see P. Niewöhner and N. Teteriatnikov, "Architecture and Ornamental Mosaics in the South Vestibule of St Sophia at Istanbul: The Secret Door of the Patriarchate and the Imperial Entrance to the Great Church," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 68 (2015): 117–56. The panel is also the subject of a study by E. Dimitriadou, "The Lunette Mosaic in the Southwest Vestibule of Hagia Sophia at Constantinople: A Reconsideration," Ph.D. thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art (2010). See also Hillsdale, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy*, 139 and 179–80.

is appropriate to the Orthodox Byzantine Empire. This dedication, however, does not automatically convert the scene into one of personal acts of piety for which the emperors are seeking forgiveness of personal sins. The emperors perform deeds fitting to their office and duty, and these intrinsically have a religious dimension, as the image makes clear. It is also significant that in this image, as Brubaker states, "the gift itself comes to represent the relation of the emperor . . . to the Virgin, and through her, to God . . . It makes visible the legitimacy of imperial power itself."[16] We should not confuse this gift with that of the true contact portraits that are the subject of this study.

In neither of the pictures just discussed, then, the Alexios and the Justinian and Constantine scenes, are the imperial images to be taken as true contact portraits, despite first appearances to the contrary. This is fully in keeping with our earlier comments concerning the issue of the representation of power, to which all imperial portraits are extremely sensitive. This leaves only one candidate for the status of a true imperial contact portrait: the emperor in *proskynesis* mosaic in Hagia Sophia. This scene, however, has proved to be one of the most vexing to interpret in the entire Byzantine repertoire, and thus warrants an extended study of its own. It is therefore the subject of the next chapter.

* * *

We have so far been concerned with exploring the broad range of images of lay portraits and holy figures in relation to the classifications of contact or *ktetor* scenes, using the kind of contact manifested between the figures and the power relations between them as defining features. Now that we have a clearer idea of the category of the contact portrait, let us turn our attention to the subject of this study proper, those scenes that fall squarely within the category for an overview of some of their other characteristics, their history, and the scholarship on the subject.

Portraits of lay supplicants before a holy figure are found the length and breadth of the Byzantine world and its sphere of influence, and at all times. Although large numbers of the scenes do not survive from the pre-iconoclastic period, the tradition was already clearly thriving in the sixth and early seventh centuries. Two examples from this period are Bishop Ecclesius being introduced to Christ by an angel in the apse of the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna (consecrated 548, Fig. 1.10),[17] and a young boy

[16] Brubaker, "Gifts and Prayers," 61.

[17] O. von Simson, *Sacred Fortress: Byzantine Art and Statecraft in Ravenna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 24.

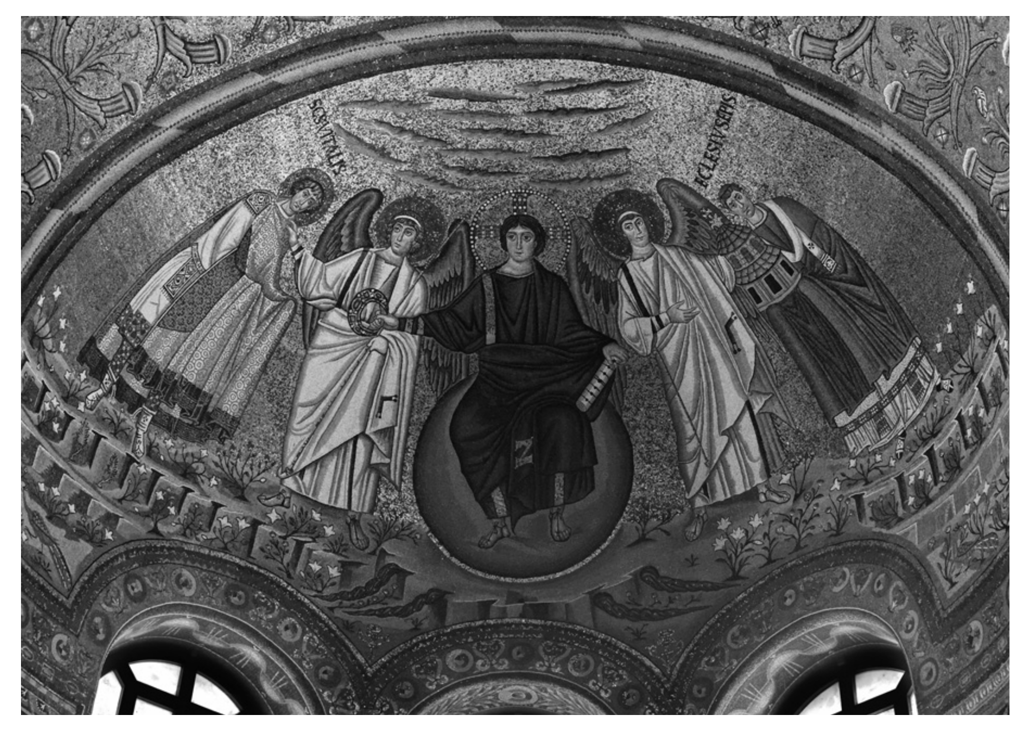


Figure 1.10: Bishop Ecclesius led to Christ by an angel, mosaic in apse of the Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, consecrated 548.

and a man approaching St. Demetrios in the Church of Hagios Demetrios in Thessalonika (before 620, Fig. 1.11).[18]

As is to be expected, almost nothing has survived from the iconoclastic period, the one exception perhaps being an icon of St. Irene with a very small supplicant in *proskynesis* beside her, dated by Weitzmann to the eighth or ninth century (Monastery of St. Katherine, Sinai, Fig. 1.12).[19] The tradition picks up again shortly after the restoration of images with the emperor in *proskynesis* before Christ in the narthex of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul, usually dated to the late ninth or early tenth centuries, and Leo in the Leo Bible of 930–40 (see Figs. 2.1 and 0.2). After this, the trickle of contact portraits becomes

[18] R. Cormack, *Writing in Gold: Byzantine Society and its Icons* (London: George Philip, 1985), 81–85.

[19] K. Weitzmann, *The Monastery of Saint Catherine at Mount Sinai: The Icons* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), icon B39, 66–67. See also Sotiriou and Sotiriou, *Icônes*, vol. II, 45–46. L. Brubaker and J. Haldon date the icon to approximately 800: see their *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Period (ca. 680–850). The Sources: An Annotated Survey* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 66.

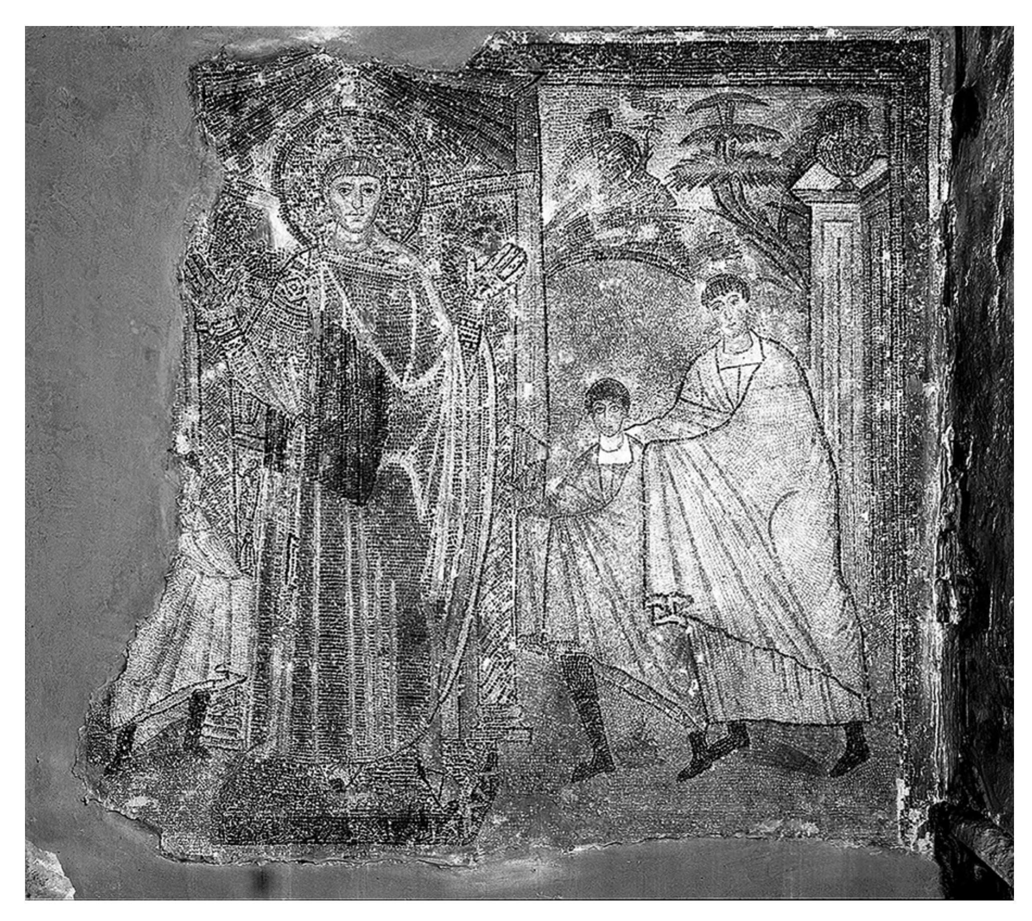


Figure 1.11: Young boy and man approaching S. Demetrios, mosaic on west wall, Church of Hagios Demetrios, Thessalonika, before 620.

a flood, with each century from the eleventh onward registering an increase in numbers. As Tomeković-Reggiani points out, one of the reasons for this increase is certainly the emergence of a new stratum of wealthy landowners, military officials, and administrative figures, resulting from the economic and military reorganizations of the Komnenes in the twelfth century. This new class in turn founded many new churches.[20] We will also consider further reasons for this increase in relation to a burgeoning interest in questions concerning the afterlife, in Chapter 3.

This uneven chronological distribution of the images sets natural limits to the time-frame of this study, since most of the images – and, indeed,

[20] Tomeković-Reggiani, "Portraits et structures sociales."



Figure 1.12: Supplicant before St.Irene, icon, St. Katherine's Monastery, Sinai, eighth or ninth century.

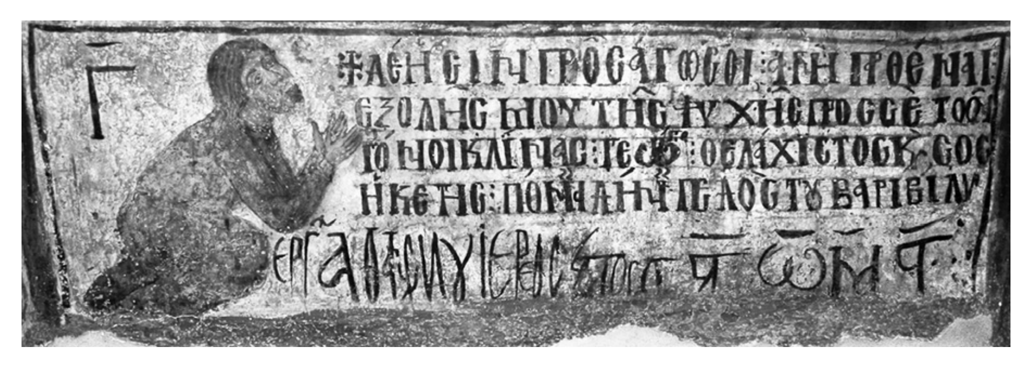


Figure 1.13: Supplicant George, painting, north wall of sanctuary, Church of Hagios Stephanos, Kastoria, 1338.

related discourses and texts used in our investigations – fall between the late eleventh and fifteenth centuries. The conclusions reached, therefore, apply specifically to this time-period, although many will apply to some degree to the fewer images from earlier time-periods as well. This is particularly the case for the last chapter, which is less dependent on contemporary historical factors than arguments made earlier in the book.

One of the distinctive features of these contact portraits is their appearance through many levels of society. Although many are of the high administrative classes, there are also a number of simple citizens with no particular status or rank who appear in the images as well. A specific example taken from a large range of possibilities is the picture of a supplicant in *proskynesis* named simply George in the Church of Hagios Stephanos in Kastoria (1338, Fig. 1.13).[21] Obviously, a minimum level of wealth was required in order to pay for the commission, but clearly the practice of portraying oneself in the act of making a gift or praying for salvation was one that was broadly based.[22] In terms of gender distribution, the majority of the scenes are of men, but there are a significant number of women, appearing either singly (especially in manuscripts) or together with their husbands.

In relation to the iconographic development of the scenes, Tania Velmans, writing in connection with the Palaiologan material, argued that with the passing of the centuries there is a tendency for the holy figures

[21] Pelekanides and Chatzidakes, *Kastoria*, 11; Velmans, *Peinture*, 85–86.

[22] For a breakdown of the social classes of donors in thirteenth-century Greece, see Kalopissi-Verti, *Dedicatory Inscriptions*, 28–41. See also S. Kalopissi-Verti, "The Peasant as Donor (13th–14th Centuries)," in J.-M. Spieser and E. Yota (eds.), *Donation et donateurs dans le monde byzantin: Actes du colloque international de l'Université de Fribourg (13–15 mars 2008)* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2012), 125–40. In the same volume, see Catherine Jolivet-Lévy, "Collective Patterns of Patronage in the Late Byzantine Village: The Evidence of Church Inscriptions," 141–62.

to diminish in size at the expense of the lay figures, which correspondingly become larger.[23] However, although this is true for the Serbian and Macedonian imperial portraits that make up a large part of the material that Velmans studies, it does not really hold for the majority of post-iconoclastic Byzantine images. For example, in the twelfth century, we find the small official in a Lectionary of the Lavra Monastery on Mount Athos (Lavra A 103, fol. 3v, Fig. 1.14),[24] as well as the full-size monk Theophanes in the Gospel of Theophanes in Melbourne (National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1960 (710–5), fol. 1v, *c.* 1125–50, Fig. 1.15).[25] On average, supplicants are smaller than the holy figures, but not exaggeratedly so, although there is also considerable variation from image to image.

If no particular trends in relation to the relative sizes of figures can be discerned, there is another area where a distinctive difference appears when scanning the images chronologically. This concerns an increasing emotionalism corresponding broadly to the division brought about by iconoclasm. Before then, supplicants are uniformly restrained and dignified (as for example in the Church of Hagios Demetrios in Thessalonika (see Fig. 1.11); afterwards, they tend to show more intensity and fervor in their approach. One of the reasons for this is the introduction of *proskynesis* into the scene. Before iconoclasm, supplicants are generally represented standing. After iconoclasm, however, *proskynesis* becomes more common and it has a transformative effect about which more will be said shortly. However, even when no *proskynesis* is present, there is generally a different atmosphere to the later scenes than the earlier ones. We can see this in the portrait in Melbourne, where, even though standing relatively upright, Theophanes bows his head deeply and hikes up his shoulders as he stands before the Virigin and Child. This speaks volumes about the change of tenor in the images.

In order to understand how this development comes about, and indeed, in order to appreciate the distinctive character of the Byzantine iteration of these scenes, it is beneficial to look at examples of contact portraits in the artistic traditions preceding Byzantium.

* * *

Contact portraits themselves have a long history. The fundamental idea of a mortal approaching a deity stretches all the way back to cylinder seals of the ancient Near East, and already, the scenes look very familiar.

[23] Velmans, *Peinture*, 79–80.

[24] S. Eustratiades, *Catalogue of the Greek Manuscripts in the Library of the Lavra on Mount Athos*, Harvard Theological Studies 11 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), 11.

[25] H. Buchtal, “An Illuminated Byzantine Gospel Book about 1100 AD,” *Special Bulletin of the National Gallery of Victoria* (1961), 1ff.; Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 76–78.



Figure 1.14: Supplicant before the Virgin, Lectionary, Lavra Monastery, Mount Athos, ms. A 103, fol. 3v, twelfth century.

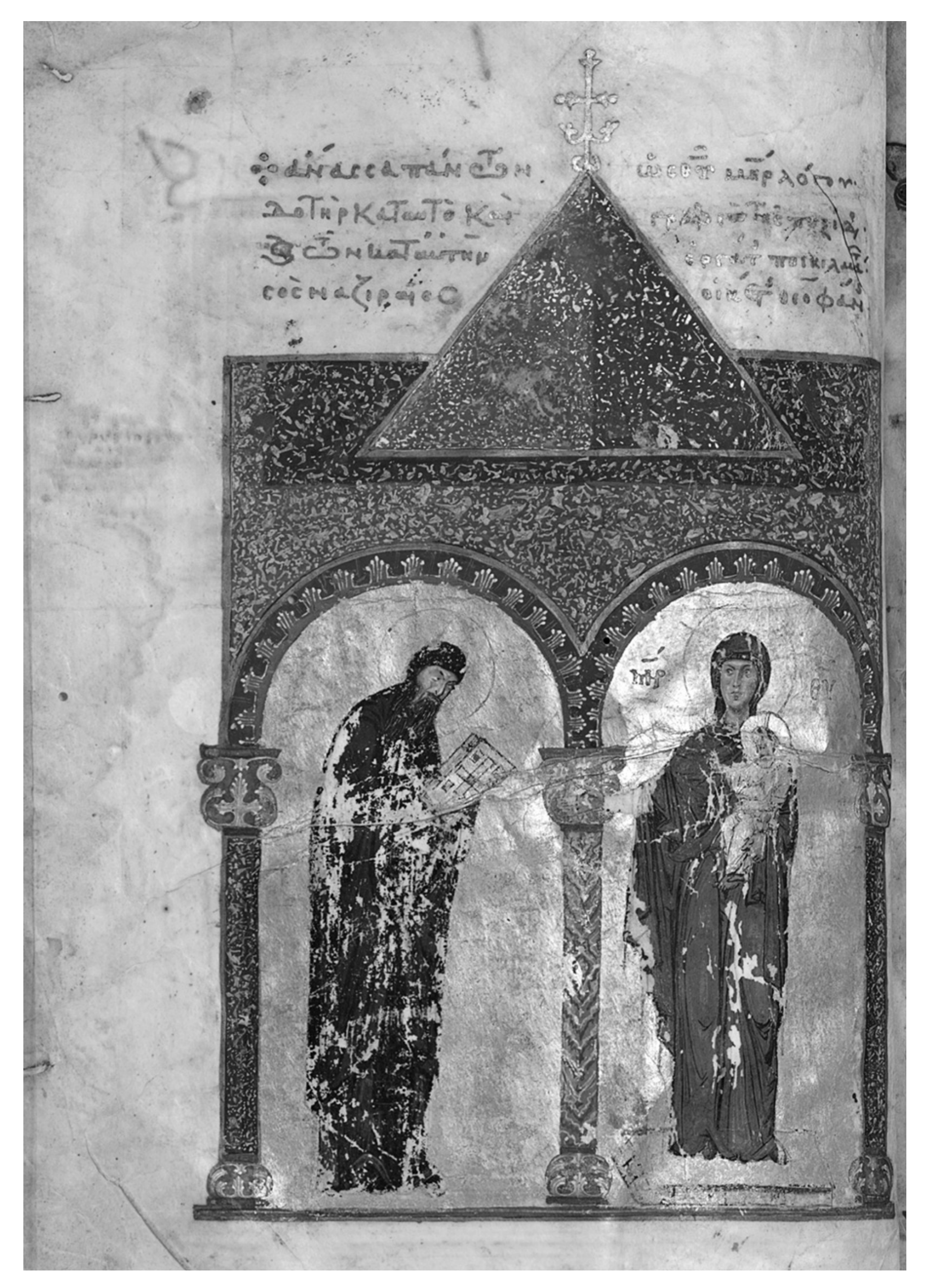


Figure 1.15: Monk Theophanes before the Virgin, The Gospel of Theophanes, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Felton Bequest, 1960 (710–5), fol. 1v, *c.* 1125–50.

Significantly, one of the key iconographic differences already mentioned, concerning whether the supplicant appears with or without an offering, is already in place. An Old Babylonian seal in the Oriental Institute Museum in Chicago represents the sun-god Shamash on the right, and a worshiper bearing a kid in his left arm, his right arm raised in prayer (1700–1530 BC, Fig. 1.16).[26] An Akkadian seal in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford has the supplicants approaching a seated deity in prayer, but empty-handed (2350–2200 BC, Fig. 1.17).[27]

Another variant of these scenes that finds its echo in Byzantine examples is the presentation scene, where a lesser deity leads one or more worshipers toward a higher deity.[28] In a further Akkadian seal, also in the Ashmolean Museum, we find a god seated on the right-hand side, approached by two deities (indicated by their horned headpieces) on the left. The second of these deities in turn holds the hand of a worshiper who carries a kid on his right arm. Behind him, an attendant holding a pail brings up the rear (Fig. 1.18).[29] Likewise, as we have seen, in the apse mosaic of San Vitale in Ravenna, Bishop Ecclesius, bearing a model of his church, has an angel present him to Christ (Fig. 1.10). An even closer visual correspondence between the forms of the ancient and Byzantine worlds can be found in a Gospel book in the Iveron Monastery in Mount Athos, where the Virgin Mary leads the supplicant by the hand to the enthroned Christ (Iveron ms. 5, fols. 456v and 457r, thirteenth century, Figs. 1.19 and 1.20).[30]

More immediate forerunners of our portraits are also be found in the scenes of sacrificial offerings in ancient Greece and Rome. Typical of innumerable Roman examples is one of the second-century Hadrianic roundels reused on the fourth-century Arch of Constantine in Rome (after AD 130, Fig. 1.21).[31] Here, we have a representation of Hadrian (although his head was later reworked to resemble the emperor Constantine) on the right of the image, extending his hand over an altar, in the process of sacrificing to the goddess Diana. Several significant differences are evident between this image and our Byzantine scenes,

[26] J. Oates, *Babylon* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986), 175.

[27] B. Buchanan, *Catalogue of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in the Ashmolean Museum*, vol. I (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), no. 370.

[28] On presentation scenes, see H. Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals: A Documentary Essay on the Art and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 74–75.

[29] Buchanan, *Catalogue*, no. 382.

[30] H. Belting, *Das illuminierte Buch in der spätbyzantinischen Gesellschaft* (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 1970), 61 ff., and Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 84–87.

[31] M. Boatwright, *Hadrian and the City of Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 190–202.



Figure 1.16: Worshiper approaching Shamash, Old Babylonian seal, the Oriental Institute Museum, Chicago, 1700–1530 BC.



Figure 1.17: Supplicants approaching deity, impression of cylinder seal (Old Akkadian Worship Scenes), Old Akkadian, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, *c.* 2340–2200 BC.

however, including, obviously, the presence of the sacrificial apparatus in the form of the altar. Further, the offering is made not directly to the goddess herself, but to her statue, clearly represented as such by the plinth on which it stands, placed directly behind the altar.

A mid-fourth-century scene from a floor mosaic of the Constantinian Villa at Antioch, however, marks a decisive step in the transition from the standard Roman sacrifice representation to the Byzantine donor portrait

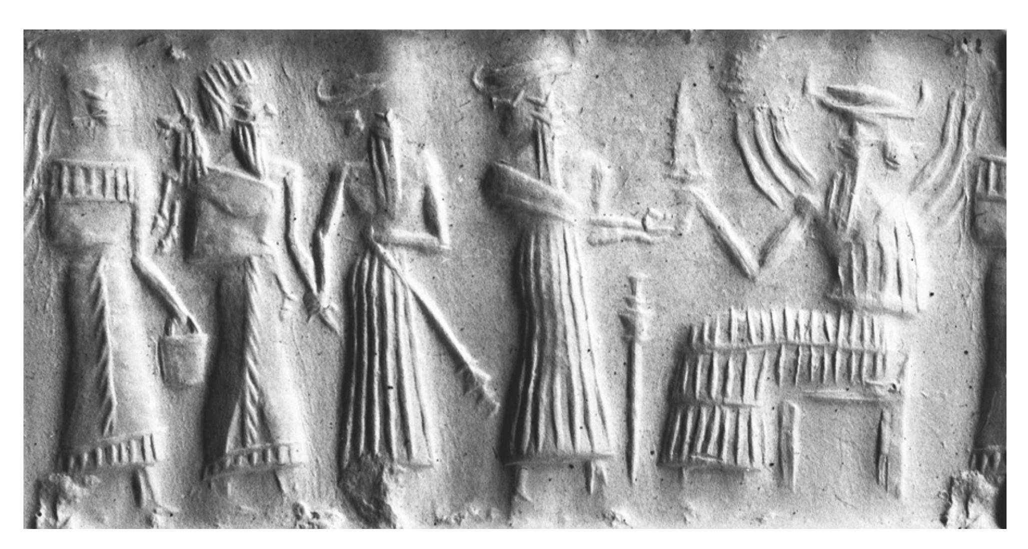


Figure 1.18: Worshiper, deities, and god, impression of cylinder seal (Old Akkadian Worship Scenes), Old Akkadian, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, *c*. 2350–2200 BC.

(Fig. 1.22).[32] This image shows a huntsman making an offering of a hare to the goddess Artemis. Even though still clearly within the context of pagan sacrifice, with its animal offering and the statue of the goddess standing upon the column, there is a major difference in that the scene contains no altar. Instead, the sacrifice itself has been suppressed, and has been re-figured as a direct, immediate donation. This we see as the huntsman forthrightly thrusts the hare forward in a gesture that foreshadows something of the deliberateness with which Byzantine donors make their offerings as well.

This re-figuring of the sacrifice represents a major conceptual shift, and opens the way toward our contact donor portraits. They too take a concrete act anchored in the physical world, such as the building of a church or the writing of a manuscript, and re-represent it as a direct donation to a deity. In this respect, both the Antioch mosaic and the Byzantine images can be contrasted to the standard Roman scene. The representation of Hadrian's sacrifice operates in what might be called "realist" mode, restricting itself to a description of a ceremony such as it might have been seen to take place in the world at a particular moment in time. The Antioch and Byzantine scenes, however, are functioning in a transformative, less earth-bound, mode that might be better called symbolic or metaphoric (which, as mentioned, we will investigate further in Chapter 4). Additionally, the Byzantines take this

[32] D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1945), vol. I, 236–42. See also F. Cimok (ed.), *Antioch Mosaics* (Istanbul: A Turizm Yayınları, 2000), 202–04.



Figure 1.19: Christ and St. John Chrysostom, Gospels, Iveron Monastery, Mount Athos, ms. 5, fol. 456v, thirteenth century.



Figure 1.20: Supplicant John led by the Virgin Mary, Gospels, Iveron Monastery, Mount Athos, ms. 5, fol. 457r, thirteenth century.



Figure 1.21: Hadrian sacrificing to Diana, sculpture, Arch of Constantine, Rome, after AD 130.

process of non-realist representation even further by depicting the divine recipient as a true, living being, rather than as a statue, as the Antioch scene does. The result of this combination of the direct donation of the supplicant and the living, breathing quality of the recipient results in an immediate increase in the vividness of the donation and the "reality" of the contact between lay and holy.

This depiction of the supplicant together with the deity as a living figure is not unique to Byzantium, however. The Romans, too, occasionally represent the deity who is the beneficiary of the sacrifice in this way, although it is the Greeks who do it most commonly. In a relief in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, a sacrifice to Hygieia and

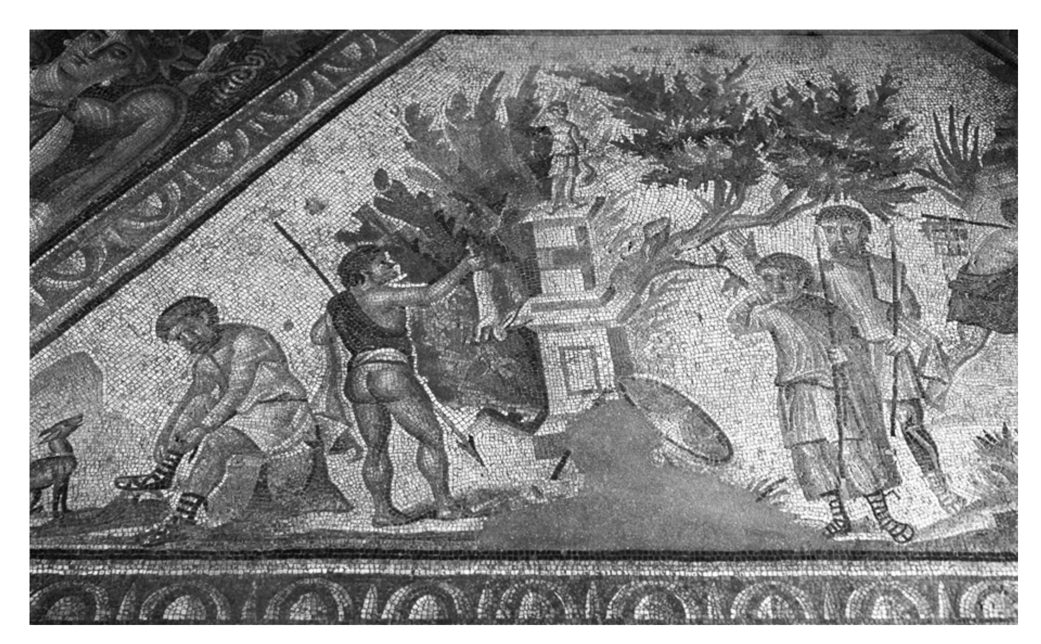


Figure 1.22: Huntsman offering a hare to Artemis, floor mosaic in Constantinian Villa, Antioch, mid-fourth century AD, now in Louvre Museum, Paris.

Asklepios is represented (shortly after 350 BC, Fig. 1.23).[33] Diminutive worshipers on the right side of the image bring a goat to an altar; on the left side, in larger scale, are placed the gods (only the lower legs and hands of Asklepios are still visible), represented as being very much alive.

Yet, for all that this scene also represents supernatural beings and humans inhabiting a common zone of existence, it is lacking in just that quality of immediacy and "reality" of which the Byzantine images are in sole possession. The reasons for this discrepancy are instructive. One might be tempted to say that it is the difference in scale between human and supernatural figures that is responsible; but this frequently applies to our Byzantine images as well, as we have seen. Rather, the difference seems to reside in where the attention of the Greek sacrificants is directed. They are all focused on the altar, which is the culmination point of their procession, and the place where they will perform their sacred rite. Not one member of the retinue rocks his or her head back to gaze at the gods looming above. It is as though the celebrants cannot see them, and do not believe what the

[33] This is National Archaeological Museum, Athens, no. 1333. It corresponds to no. 66 in J. Boardman, *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, 10 vols. (Zurich: Artemis, 1981–99), vol. II, 873.



Figure 1.23: Worshipers bring a goat to an altar to sacrifice to Hygieia and Asklepios, National Archaeological Museum, Athens, shortly after 350 BC.

image itself represents: that the gods are present before them. Nothing could be further in spirit and feeling from our Byzantine images.[34]

One further feature also plays a crucial role in determining the unique characteristics of many of the Byzantine images that, surprisingly, we do not find in the earlier examples: the *proskynesis* of the supplicant before the holy figure. Submissive, kneeling figures there are aplenty in the art of the early Christian period, of Rome, and of the ancient Near East, from where the gesture is said to have arisen.[35] It is a striking fact, however, that the posture is generally adopted in front of earthly potentates such as emperors and kings, not gods. An example of this can be seen in Assyrian art, on the Black Obelisk of around 740 BC, where the subject King Jehu of the Israelites is shown prostrate before King Shalmanesser III (British Museum, London, Fig. 1.24).[36] A further instance of this appears in the Conquest and Clemency relief, originally from the Arch of Marcus Aurelius, which represents

[34] For many more scenes of a similar type, see A. Comella, *I relievi votivi greci de periodo aracaic e classico* (Bari: Edipuglia, 2002). See also F. T. van Straten, *Hierà kalá: Images of Animal Sacrifice in Archaic and Classical Greece* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

[35] Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. A. Godley, Loeb Clasical Library 117 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 1:134.

[36] A. Moortgat, *Art of Ancient Mesopotamia* (London: Phaidon, 1969), 139–40; H. Frankfort, *Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1954), 90–91.



Figure 1.24: King Jehu before Shalmanesser III, Black Obelisk of Shalmanesser III, British Museum, London, *c.* 740 BC.

a common trope in Roman sculpture, of defeated barbarians kneeling before the mounted emperor (Museo del Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome, AD 176–80, Fig. 1.25).[37]

Conversely, in ancient art, as all our images above show, whenever a worshiper is placed before a deity or performs a sacrifice, they do so standing (see Figs. 1.16, 1.17, 1.18, 1.21, 1.22, 1.23). Although this tradition of the upright approach survives in many of the Byzantine images, another new strand develops. Now, the idea of drawing near to a spiritual figure is grafted onto an already-existent iconography showing kneeling, submissive figures before an earthly potentate. The earthly ruler is substituted by a heavenly figure, the result being the typical Byzantine *proskynesis* contact portrait.

We cannot tell exactly when this wedding happened, but it is strikingly absent from pre-iconoclastic imagery. Given the losses involved it would perhaps be rash to declare definitively that it is a late development, but the earliest example seems to be the Sinai icon of a supplicant before St. Irene mentioned above, which may be an eighth-century image (see Fig. 1.12). All others are ninth century or later. Whenever the development takes place, however, it certainly opens a new chapter of immediacy and intensity in the contact between the lay and holy figures in the images.

It should be remarked as well that the *proskynesis* that we find in Byzantium is not quite the one that we find in Rome. As our Marcus Aurelius example demonstrates, when conquered peoples kneel before the Roman emperor in submission, they are still relatively dignified, with backs

[37] D. Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 292–94.



Figure 1.25: Conquest and Clemency relief of Marcus Aurelius, Museo del Palazzo dei Conservatori, Rome, AD 176–80.

and heads upright (see Fig. 1.25). In Byzantium, however, the prostration can be much more complete, with the back parallel to the ground and the head lowered. This draws them closer to the Assyrian example of Jehu and Shalmanesser III (see Fig. 1.24). Yet even here, the Byzantine gesture can be more extreme. It exploits to a much greater degree the many expressive possibilities of the folding of the human body. It is often passionate and exaggerated, leaving little doubt that the physical exertions required to enter the position could only be motivated by the most powerful feelings toward the figure being adored. Even at its stiffest and most awkward, as in the case of George of Antioch at the Church of the Martorana in Palermo, it is always profoundly human and full of emotion (*c.* 1140, Fig. 1.26).[38] Indeed, some of the most memorably expressive, passionate, and ardent scenes from the corpus of contact portraits are those of supplicants in *proskynesis*. Consider, for example, the portrait page in a Lectionary in the Greek Patriarchate in Jerusalem (1061, Megale Panhagia 1, fol. 1v, 1061, Fig. 1.27).[39] An unruly image, with the supplicant Basil flinging himself to the ground as his gift wings its way to Heaven, it exemplifies the fervor that can be captured by *proskynesis*. It is fully understandable that the gesture should have been carried over from imperial art, and that it became so popular.[40]

This discussion of the changes rung on the art of their predecessors allows us to grasp the extent to which Byzantines were continually striving for both a greater degree of "reality" in the representation of the contact between lay and holy and a greater intensity of that contact. With this in mind it is interesting to turn to one of the best-known images in Byzantine art, the Justinian panel in the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna, which shows the emperor holding a gift of a gold paten in his hands (church consecrated 548, Fig. 1.28).[41] This scene is in many ways

[38] O. Demus, *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 82; E. Kitzinger, *The Mosaics of St Mary's of the Admiral in Palermo* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1990), especially 105–06 and 197–206.

[39] On the manuscript and its miniatures, see K. Lake and S. Lake, *Dated Greek Minuscule Manuscripts to the Year 1200*, 10 vols. (Boston: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 1934–39), vol. V, no 213. Also see K. Clark, *Checklist of Manuscripts in the Libraries of the Greek and Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1953), 15 and 30, and Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 57–59.

[40] For more on *proskynesis* in Byzantine art, amongst a large bibliography, see A. Cutler, *Transfigurations: Studies in the Dynamics of Byzantine Iconography* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), 53–91; L. Brubaker, "Gesture in Byzantium," *Past and Present* 4 (2009): 36–56; and Hillsdale, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy*, 126–33.

[41] Von Simson, *Sacred Fortress*, 27–29. For a detailed discussion of the panels themselves in relation to their historical context, see I. Andreescu-Treadgold and W. Treadgold, "Procopius and the Imperial Panels of S. Vitale," *Art Bulletin* 79 (1997): 708–23. See also discussion on the panels in Chapter 5.

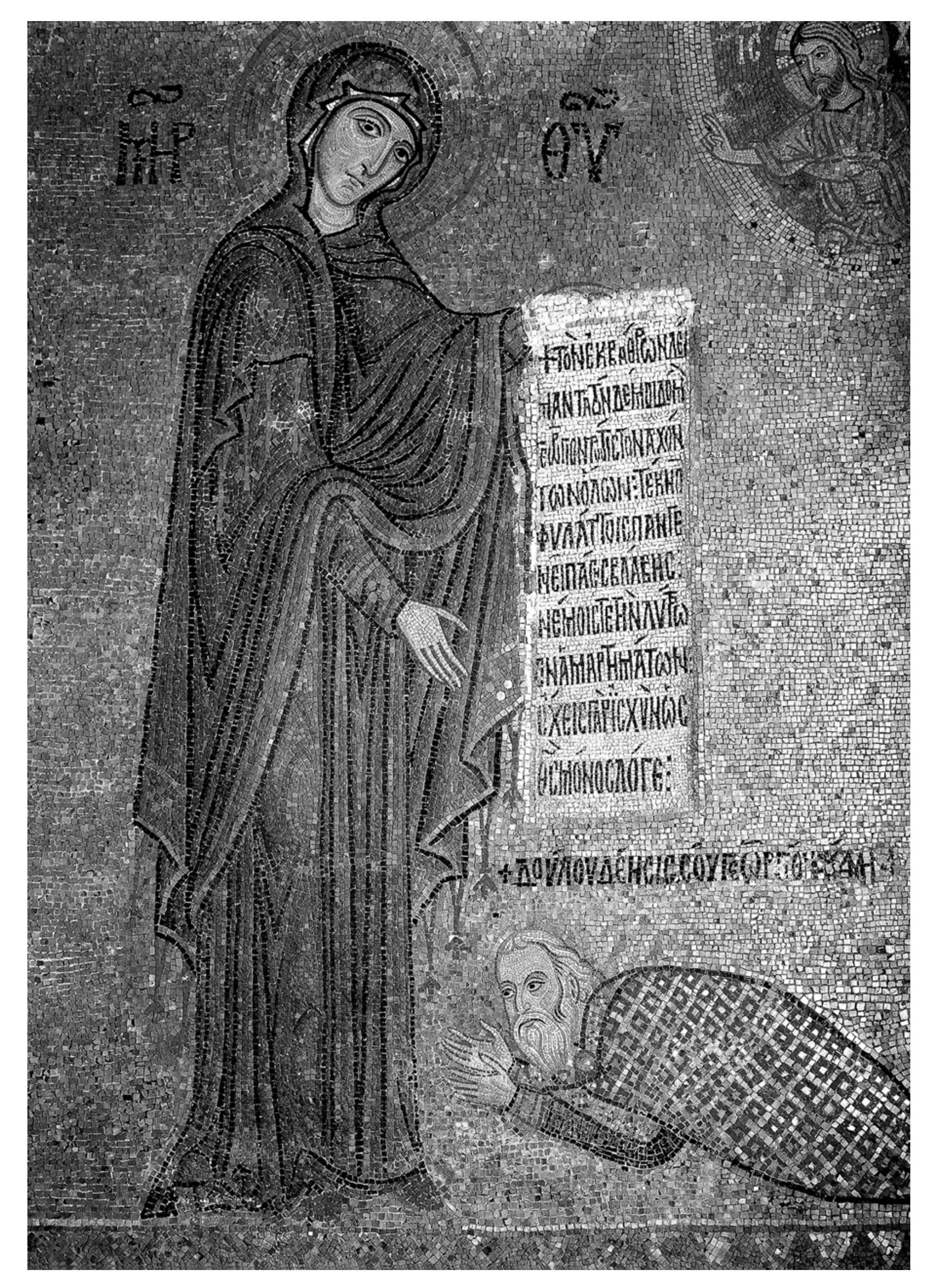


Figure 1.26: George of Antioch before the Virgin, mosaic, originally probably in narthex, Church of the Martorana, Palermo, *c.* 1140.



Figure 1.27: Basil before the Virgin, Lectionary, Greek Patriarchate, Jerusalem, Megale Panhagia 1, fol. 1v, 1061.



Figure 1.28: Emperor Justinian and entourage, mosaic in apse, Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, consecrated 548.

the equivalent of the later panels in the south gallery of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul that we have already looked at, in that it represents an official act of imperial support for the church, rather than a personal supplication (see Figs. 1.4 and 1.5). Yet there is also a crucial difference between these scenes: the Justinian panel shows a gift-bearing procession, but includes no recipient. It is true that, within the overall pictorial schema of the church, the gift is ultimately destined for Christ in the apse, but the absence in the image itself of the figure for whom it is intended has certain consequences.

Considering all that has been said about the desire for contact, it should come as no surprise to find that this is the last of such scenes in Byzantine art. The Hagia Sophia panels constitute, in effect, the later, updated version of the same idea. The Justinian scene, rather, is cut from the same cloth as the earlier Roman image that appears on the south frieze of the Ara Pacis



Figure 1.29: Imperial procession, Ara Pacis Augustae, Rome, 13–19 BC.

Augustae in Rome (13–19 BC, Fig. 1.29).[42] Here too, the emperor appears in procession, accompanied by religious figures and attendants as he participates in a religious ritual bringing gifts to the gods, but where no holy recipients are represented. To later Byzantine observers the Justinian panel might have seemed to stop short of what was most wished for in a gift-presentation scene, even in the mitigated form in which it appears in the Hagia Sophia images. The Justinian scene might, indeed, have looked as though it was only half done.

On the other hand, however, the lack of holy recipient is also one of the major strengths of the image as an imperial scene. The advantage that this representation has over all the later imperial images that concede to the desire for contact is precisely that here the emperor is supreme in the visual field. Since there is no greater authority represented, there is no prickly path to negotiate in the relationship between varying grades of supreme power. The emperor does not have to concede anything to a more powerful figure, yet he still appears as pious, fulfilling his religious duty. In a sense, the Justinian panel remains the impossible ideal of imperial religious donation: to give the gift, yet not come off as second best.

To round out this examination of the chief characteristics of contact portraits, a further remarkable feature deserves comment. Even within the broad parameters that all the scenes adhere to, an enormous amount of variation is still visible between them, almost every one having a distinct mood and feeling. In fact, the range that they demonstrate in this respect is far greater than perhaps any other iconographic type in the Byzantine

[42] Kleiner, *Roman Sculpture*, 90–99. See also J. Elsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 177–210, on the processional aspect of both the San Vitale panels and the Ara Pacis.

repertoire. From the upright monk in the Melbourne Gospels, who nonetheless inclines toward the Virgin and Child with some intensity, to the apparent abjection of the supplicant in ms. Lavra A 103, to the sincere concern of Theodore at the Kariye Camii (Fig. 0.1), each scene has its own temper and atmosphere. On the one hand, these variations are rendered possible because these portraits of lay figures do not have to adhere to the rules governing the representation of holy figures in their eternal truth. On the other hand, within a less vibrant artistic tradition the portraits might easily have fallen into formulaic platitudes. The scenes, to a remarkable degree, retain their flexibility. Spurred by the yearning for contact, each image is thought anew.

2 On Meaning in Portraits: The Knot of Intention and the Question of the Patron's Share

In the lunette above the Imperial Door in the narthex of the Church of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul appears one of the more famous mosaics in Byzantine art (Fig. 2.1). A large figure of Christ, seated upon an ample "lyre-backed" throne, occupies the center of the image. His right hand is raised in a blessing gesture, whilst in his left he holds an open book, upon which are inscribed the words "Peace be with you" (John 20:19, 26), and "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). To his right appears the substantial figure of an emperor in *proskynesis*. The emperor is prostrate, his back almost parallel to the ground, and his hands are raised towards Christ. Above the emperor is a roundel enclosing a bust of the Virgin. She turns slightly to her left, her hands echoing those of the emperor as she gestures toward Christ. Complementing this medallion is another, placed at Christ's left. Contained within it is the bust of an archangel holding a staff. The mosaic has been dated to the late ninth or (early) tenth centuries on stylistic grounds.[1]

The question of the exact meaning of this image has proved vexing to generations of Byzantinists, and provoked much discussion. It therefore proves to be an ideal test case for issues of meaning in relation to contact portraits. This chapter proceeds in three stages. The first section reexamines both the image itself and the story of the scholarship surrounding it, demonstrating how a narrow web of discourses concerning the patron's intention has come to delimit the conception of what that meaning might be. It argues against that view of intention, demonstrating other components

[1] T. Whittemore, *The Mosaics of St Sophia at Istanbul: Preliminary Report on the First Year's Work, 1931–1932. The Mosaics of the Narthex* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933). For the full earlier bibliography on this mosaic, see V. Lazarev, *Storia della pittura bizantina* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967), 177 n. 3, supplemented by Cutler, *Transfigurations*, 5 n. 2. Additionally, see R. Cormack, "Interpreting the Mosaics in St Sophia at Istanbul," *Art History* 4 (1981): 131–49; Cormack, "The Emperor at St Sophia"; A. Schminck, "'Rota tu volubilis': Kaisermacht und Patriarchenmacht in Mosaiken," in L. Burgmann, M. T. Fögen, and A. Schminck (eds.), *Cupido Legum* (Frankfurt: Löwenklau, 1985), 211–34; T. Steppan, "Die Mosaiken der Athosklosters Vatopaidi: Stilkritische und Ikonographische Überlegungen," *Cahiers archéologiques* 42 (1994): 87–122.



Figure 2.1: Emperor before Christ, mosaic in narthex, Church of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, late ninth or early tenth century.

that are involved in constituting meaning, and makes a first suggestion for alternative readings of the image. Despite this rejection of the intentional view, the second section stays with that subject, examining further its tenacity as an interpretive strategy. As we will see, intention is almost as difficult to reject as it is to accept. This section attempts to understand where, exactly, intention fits within the general theory of meaning sketched in the previous section. In the third section we return to the image, to suggest further ways of understanding it that take into account the preceding material.

As will be clear from our discussion in the Introduction, images of an emperor in *proskynesis* are few and far between both in the entire stretch of Byzantine art preceding the scene and for several centuries after.[2] One other example of an emperor in this position is described by John

[2] After the restoration of Byzantine rule of Constantinople in 1264, the conquering Palaiologan emperor Michael VIII set up a column topped with a bronze statue of himself kneeling and presenting to the Archangel Michael a model of the city. The same emperor also started what became a tradition of issuing coins showing the emperor kneeling before Christ or the Virgin. For a full treatment of both the statue and the coins, see Hillsdale, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy*, 88–197.

Mauropous, writing in the eleventh century, although the image is now lost.[3] Unlike other mosaics representing emperors in Hagia Sophia, no inscription accompanies the scene. Those studying it have long sought both an identification for the emperor and, perhaps more importantly, an explanation for why he should be represented in this extraordinary fashion. Many authors note the resemblance to standard contact portraits, but few regard this as an adequate justification, and have put forth ever more complex reasons to explain it.

It is generally agreed that the emperor is either Basil I (r. 867–86), his son Leo VI (r. 886–912), or Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos (r. 913–59), although in recent scholarship, the balance has tipped towards Leo VI. An early commentator on the image, Scharf, suggested that the emperor should be taken as Basil I on the basis of a speech he delivered before the eighth Church Council in 869. In the speech, Basil declares that he would be willing to cast himself down before the Lord to pray for forgiveness in view of the terrors of the Last Judgment.[4] Mirković argued instead that the emperor represents Leo VI, pointing to a poem where Leo too beseeches forgiveness in the face of the Last Judgment.[5] Osieczkowska also agreed that the emperor shown is Leo, but adduced different evidence. Focusing her attention on the roundels of the Virgin and angel in the scene, she notes a sermon that the emperor delivered where he expresses his devotion to the annunciation, and pleads for the Virgin to act as his guide and protector.[6]

An apparently radical reinterpretation of the image was offered by Oikonomides in 1976. Whilst he also identified the emperor as Leo VI, he claimed that the image was commissioned, and its form dictated not by the emperor himself, but by his ecclesiastical enemy, the archbishop Nikolas Mystikos. Leo had come into conflict with the Church authorities over the subject of his fourth marriage. Such marriages were specifically

[3] John Mauropous, *Johannis Euchaitarum metropolitae quae in codice vaticano graeco 676 supersunt*, ed. P. de Lagarde (Göttingen: n.p., 1882), epigram 65; see C. Mango, *Art of the Byzantine Empire, 312–1453: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 220.

[4] J. Scharf, "Der Kaiser in Proskynese," in P. Classen (ed.), *Festschrift Percy Ernst Schramm zu seinem siebzigsten Geburtstag von Schülern und Freunden zugeeignet* (Wiesbaden: F. Steiner, 1964), 27–35. The speech appears in G. D. Mansi (ed.), *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio* (Florence and Venice: n.p., 1759–98; repr. Arnhem and Leipzig, 1926), 16:94A and 356D.

[5] L. Mirković, "Das Mosaik über der Kaisertür im Narthex der Kirche der Hl. Sophia in Konstantinopel," *Atti dello VIII Congresso Internazionale di Studi Bizantini*, published in *Studi bizantini e neoellenici* 8 (Rome: Associazione nazionale per gli studi bizantini, 1953): 206–17.

[6] C. Osieczkowska, "La mosaïque de la porte-royale à Sainte-Sophie de Constantinople et la litanie de tous les saints," *Byzantion* 9 (1934): 40–83.

prohibited by Church law, and a bitter struggle ensued in which Archbishop Mystikos was removed from his post. Leo finally repented on his deathbed, and Mystikos was reinstated as archbishop. It was then, according to Oikonomides, that Mystikos, not Leo, commissioned the mosaic, the emperor's position representing his humiliation at the hands of the archbishop, and his repentance for his wrongful deeds. In this reading, then, the mosaic is viewed as a sort of calculated insult delivered by the archbishop to the emperor, and a statement of the primacy of Church over State.[7]

In recent years, emphasis has shifted away from an almost exclusive focus on the identification of the emperor, and new paths of scholarship have begun to appear, several of which will be encountered later in the chapter. Brubaker, for example, identifies the emperor as Leo VI, but instead of taking the absence of a name as a cause for regret, a lack that must be remedied by scholarship, she sees it as a deliberate feature of the composition of the mosaic. It implies that the image should be seen as concerning "the emperor as institution ... not about any particular living emperor as donor."[8] She also links the image in this respect to the southwest vestibule mosaic of Constantine and Justinian seen earlier (Fig. 1.9). This mosaic is also, in a sense, anonymous, in that the emperor who presumably set it up is indicated neither by inscription nor by image. It thus refers to "an iconic act of imperial power as a whole, rather than one of a specific emperor."[9]

The earlier generations of authors, however, in their pursuit of identification and the reasons for the particular form that the scene takes, still exert a powerful influence over scholarship in the field. Many of their presuppositions concerning the meaning of the mosaic, which extend to contact portraits as a whole, remain intact and deserve deeper consideration. As Robin Cormack demonstrates, one feature that all these theories have in common is that they assume the mosaic to be a pictorial translation of either a unique verbal text or a particular life event.[10] All therefore depend on the idea that the patron (whoever he might be) has deliberately tailored the image to suit a specific intention that he has. Each author is effectively making the far-reaching, albeit covert, theoretical assumption that the image means just what its patron intended it to mean.

[7] N. Oikonomides, "Leo VI and the Narthex Mosaic of Saint Sophia," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 30 (1976): 154–72.

[8] Brubaker, "Gifts and Prayers," 60. [9] Brubaker, "Gifts and Prayers," 61.

[10] R. Cormack, "Patronage and New Programs of Byzantine Iconography," in *17th International Byzantine Congress: Major Papers. Washington DC* (New York: A. D. Caratzas, 1986), 609–27, at 621.

The intentionalist view of meaning (as this approach has come to be known) has suffered mixed fortunes in recent years. Long having been the dominant mode of interpretation of texts both visual and verbal, it was famously attacked by Wimsatt and Beardsley,[11] and perhaps even more famously attacked again by Barthes in "The Death of the Author" and subsequent works.[12] Its rejection by contemporary critical theory is almost complete.[13] Despite its repeated death, however, it continues to be both a topic of lively debate and the mainstay of conventional art history, albeit often in its most untheorized form. As we will see, the debate remains relevant to the interpretation of the lunette mosaic.

An example from a different area of Byzantine art can help us in understanding the dangers of privileging intention in the realm of meaning. It is provided by the under-exploited tale of a coin of Isaac Komnenos (r. 1057–59). Rather than following numismatic convention by representing himself being crowned by Christ or the Virgin, Isaac had himself depicted alone on the coin, holding in his hand a drawn sword.[14] This provoked at least two contemporary writers, John Zonaras and the author of the *Skylitzes Continuatus*, to comment that in doing so the emperor was declaring that he ruled by the might of the sword, and not by divine right, as was implied by the more usual divine coronation.[15] Isaac was a military strongman, and undoubtedly the purpose of his coin was to foster his martial reputation, but he surely was not intentionally (!) meaning to suggest that his rule was founded not on divine assent but on force, as was publicly perceived. It does not necessarily follow, then, that just because a patron thought his image meant one thing, everybody else agreed with him.

More than just this though, an intentionalist must declare that Isaac is right and the public is wrong. Yet if anything, the reverse is true. We will

[11] W. Wimsatt and M. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," in W. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 3–18.

[12] R. Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image-Music-Text*, ed. and trans. S. Heath (New York and London: Fontana, 1977), 142–48. See also R. Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. R. Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1975); R. Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. R. Miller (New York: Hill & Wang, 1974).

[13] For a good overview of the topic and its resilience as a question, see A. Patterson, "Intention," in F. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin (eds.), *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 135–46.

[14] W. Wroth, *Catalogue of the Imperial Byzantine Coins in the British Museum*, 2 vols. (London: British Museum, 1908), vol. II, 512 and pl. 60, 12.

[15] Wroth, *Catalogue,* vol. I, lvii. The *Skylitzes Continuatus* appears in George Kedrenos*, Synopsis of Histories*, ed. E. Bekker in *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, vol. XXXV (Bonn: Weber, 1828–97), 641A; John Zonaras, *Extracts of History*, 18.4.2, ed. M. Pinder and T. Büttner-Wobst in *Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, vol. XLVI (Bonn: Weber, 1828–97), 666.

come back to this shortly, but for the moment let us just note that meaning is not the exclusive preserve of the patron.

This approach, where one considers meaning not in relation to the intention of the patron but rather to the interpretation of other viewers of the scene, is largely that of Reception Theory, associated mostly with Jauss.[16] It proves to be useful again in the case of the emperor in *proskynesis* mosaic we have been examining. Let us assume for a moment that the mosaic is based upon Leo's sermon, as Osieczkowska suggested. Suppose that observers who were not present in the church when the sermon was delivered were to examine the image, and attempt to interpret it. This would surely not imply that the meaning of the image had eluded them. A contemporary observer of the mosaic, ignorant of any specifics the work may or may not be based upon, would still come to find "meaning" in it because the pictorial elements within it have a specific semantic range, with defined possibilities of meaning, familiar to most in an interpretive community. Although the scene as a whole may be unusual in Byzantine art, its elements all bear a close relation to traditional motifs with which observers would have been highly familiar. The gesture of *proskynesis* itself constitutes a fundamental part of the Byzantine experience and vocabulary, carrying a broad but delimited range of possible connotations. Cutler, in his study of the motif, concludes that amongst these connotations were defeat, veneration, entreaty, penitence, and prayer.[17] Interpretations of the emperor in the mosaic would necessarily start at least from some of those concepts. Just what meaning is ultimately derived, however, will require some detailed discussion.

The register of "meaning" that emerges from this example is of course rather different from that considered by the authors above. They consider it in its highly personalized form, pertaining to the specifics of lives as individually lived, and thoughts consciously held by the patron: Leo's personal devotion to the annunciation and the Virgin Mary, Basil's ruminations on his own relation to the Last Judgment, or Mystikos's power-struggle with Leo. The second type of meaning, that of the neutral observer, however, is arrived at through means that are necessarily broad and impersonal – or, better, pan-personal – in that they are the sorts of generalized meanings most people in an interpretive community would hold in common, without being aware of those personal details that the

[16] H. Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetics of Reception*, trans. T. Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

[17] Cutler, *Transfigurations*, 53–91. See also Chapter 1, pp. 54–57, on *proskynesis*.

patron has in mind when he commissions the work. In fact, these broader meanings, structured by the work itself in terms of an established set of connotations within a system of signification, are logically prior to intention; the patron is drawing on precisely those common meanings of motifs in arriving at the specifics of what he thinks the work means, or, in other words, its intention. Even before the patron gets to it and uses it in relation to his own personal narrative and history, *proskynesis* "means" deliberate humility, and the exercise of power by one being over another.

Once this is made clear, one can readily see that all of the very specific intentions that we looked at earlier are based on the broader "public" meaning that a figure in *proskynesis* before Christ constitutes an admission of sins, a repentance, and a corresponding plea for forgiveness. As we have seen, scholars such as Osieczkowska and Scharf, even though each identifies the emperor differently, still assume this to be the general meaning of the *proskynesis* of their chosen character, focusing particularly on the petition for clemency and forgiveness. And of course, despite the apparent reorientation provided by the Oikonomides reading, he too takes the central point of the scene to be a statement of the emperor's wrongful ways, although in this case it is the archbishop who is proclaiming them.

Once we have located this single, nodal starting point for the various readings of the image, it is easy in retrospect to uncover the process that most scholars have followed in arriving at their theories. Beginning with the generalized premise that the *proskynesis* means a begging for forgiveness of sins committed, a text or narrative is discovered where an emperor (or someone else) alludes to his sins and requests clemency. The text will of course fit the image perfectly, as it is based on the generalized meaning of the motif.

The problem with this, however, as becomes evident on perusing the literature on the mosaic, is that there are several texts that fulfill exactly the same requirements of referring to the sins of an emperor. And each narrative thus discovered will therefore "fit" the image to the same degree as all the others because each has the identical point of contact with it, a common assumption as to what the *proskynesis* means in broad significatory terms. It is thus impossible to tell which is the "correct" one. There is nothing to argue for or against, as each is supported by the same aspect of the image no more and no less than any of the others.[18]

[18] On the idea of the "fit," and the way in which meaning appears to inhere in a text (or, for our purposes, an image), waiting to be "discovered," see L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 52–53, 84–85, 144–45, 183.

This, then, is as far as most have come in reading the picture. A broad, public meaning has been spun out on a number of different personalized narratives. As a first step in the reconsideration of the image, rather than searching for the (misleadingly self-authenticating) golden life-event at the end of the intentionalist rainbow, we need to reevaluate the core meaning that has been assigned to the image by all the authors so far examined. On the one hand, the idea that the emperor is in *proskynesis* because he is begging for forgiveness for his sins appears to be well founded. Most authors quote Basil, and Mauropous, whose description of a scene representing an emperor in *proskynesis* was mentioned earlier. In contemplating that image, Mauropous imagines the emperor to be saying the following words: "It is thou who has appointed me lord of thy creatures and master of my fellow slaves, but having proved to be the slave of sin, I tremble before thy scourge, Oh Lord and Judge."[19] Additionally, Oikonomides, as evidence for his assertion that the image is to be taken as one of humiliation and repentance, points to scenes of the Repentance of King David that often appear in psalters. These illustrations represent David in a position of prostration that frequently resembles that of our emperor, occasionally before the prophet Nathan.[20]

This hypothesis, however, requires further consideration. As we have seen, the chief determinant in the meaning of the image, the signifier to which most attention has been paid, is the *proskynesis* motif. Yet we also need to take into account the impact that another signifier might have upon the first, the fact that it is no average citizen but the emperor himself who is engaged in the act of prostration.

It is a truism of Byzantine studies that the emperor enjoyed an exalted status in Byzantine society. Our earlier discussion in Chapter 1 indicated some of the ways in which this position was constituted and maintained by imperial imagery, particularly divine coronations, which establish the emperor as no less than the earthly counterpart of Christ. It is to this realm of imperial representation in general that we should now return.

When surveying these imperial images, an important point emerges. Not only is there a vast number of such scenes that engage in the activity of representing the emperor in the most positive of lights, but the converse applies as well: there are virtually no images of the emperor that do *not* do

[19] Mauropous, *Johannis euchaitarum metropolitae*, epigram 65. The translation given here is by Mango, *Art of the Byzantine Empire*, 220. See C. Walter, "Further Notes on the Deesis," *Revue des études byzantines* 28 (1970): 161–87, at 182–87, for a discussion of this passage.

[20] Oikonomides, "Leo VI," 156–58. The story of the King David and Nathan is given in 2 Kings 12: 1–15.

this. Our earlier discussion of the nuances of the power positions in the imperial *ktetor*s' portraits demonstrates exactly this point.[21] These scenes are extremely careful not to compromise the power of the emperor, not to allow the imperial figures to appear diminished in any way.

As a whole, then, it may be said that images of the emperor thus effectively form a category unto themselves, one reserved almost exclusively for representations that declare *only* the supreme position of the emperor. The category of imperial representations is not one in which the objects described by it (the emperors) exhibit a range of different standings, from the high to the neutral and below. Rather, the very concept "representation of the emperor" includes within itself the idea of a particular attitude of acclamation toward, and status of, the objects represented. Rigorously excluded are any representations of weakness, error, or fallibility, as this would undermine the emperor's position as the ultimate authority – one, moreover, directly selected by God.

The question that therefore needs to be posed here concerns the effect that constant exposure to this category of images would have had upon observers. One result was no doubt the inculcation of the belief in the supreme status of the emperor. A second consequence, no less significant, would be the constitution within observers of an implicit belief and set of expectations regarding not only the emperors, but the *category* of imperial images itself, to the effect of the point just made: that it was in the very nature of these images to be engaging always and only in the activity of declaring the rights of the emperor to his station at the absolute pinnacle of society. Furthermore, part of this belief would in turn involve a set of expectations (again implicit) that all imperial images would continue to do what they had always done so insistently before: praise and laud the emperor, and propound his exceptional standing.

In the light of this, I suggest that the core meaning we have so far seen attributed to the mosaic, of imperial fallibility and sin, would have been found by contemporary viewers to be at the least surprising, if not outright shocking. That reading brings forward those exact qualities that images of the emperor seek to banish from their realm, and thus contravenes all the principles and expectations aroused by the category of imperial representations. The argument is made in the forthcoming pages that such an interpretation would therefore have been most unlikely.

The crucial role played by expectations of what a given category of images would be declaring are perfectly illustrated in the much less

[21] See Chapter 1, pp. 26–31 and 57–61.

extreme case of the coin of Isaac Komnenos examined earlier, which deals with a subset of imperial iconography. Isaac presumably thought the motif said just what he wanted it to say in terms of his military prowess, and no more. The public interpretation, however, was arrived at because people generally expected coins to make statements about the conceptual foundations of imperial rule. Those expectations meant that the new image, instead of just being seen as a simple statement of military power in its own right, as was no doubt intended, would be seen as a replacement, a substitution for the old image. The new coin was taken to be making the same category of statement as all coins up to that point had done, and so had to be seen as a new declaration of the basis of imperial rule, rather than to be making an entirely different type of statement, one not meant to be in competition with the other at all.

Returning to the lunette mosaic, to argue that viewers would have found the interpretations so far suggested to be extremely surprising is not to say that the public was naively unaware of the many nefarious deeds of their emperors, nor that the emperor himself was considered to be free from sin. But it is clear that these aspects do not figure at all under the classification of "emperor in representation." Indeed, the whole thrust of imperial iconography was precisely to construct a category where the emperor was distanced from many of his aspects as being "merely human." The business of being emperor entails one's distance from ordinary human qualities, one's extraordinariness, and it is the task of imperial representations to declare this. It is as emperor that one has supreme status and qualities, not as an ordinary man.

We find an illustration of this in the rhetoric of the period, reported by Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos, which asserts that "the luminosity of the emperors assures the joy of the universe."[22] Or indeed, as the inscription to the gorgeous image of an emperor in ms. Coislin 79 in the Bibliothèque nationale de France states, the imperial couple are "shining as if luminescent" (fol. 2r, eleventh century; see Fig. 4.4).[23] Yet it is clear that it is not in virtue of prior possession of these qualities that one is anointed emperor. It is only after one has already attained the rank that one can be appropriately described thus. The purpose of imperial iconography is to constitute this gulf in as wide a form as possible, and to prevent any

22 Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos, *The Book of Ceremonies,* in *The Book of Ceremonies: With the Greek Edition of the Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae (Bonn, 1829)*, trans. A. Moffatt and M. Tall (Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 2012), 1,65, p. 295. See also Grabar, *L'empereur*, 104.

23 See Chapter 4 for more on this image. Also Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 110–11.

dwelling on the ordinariness of the emperor, or his similarities with the rest of humanity. Representations of the divine coronation too are a major participant in this project of maintaining his "otherness." By declaring the divine, metaphysical basis for his power, the scene confers legitimacy on him, deliberately skirting the issues of whether power was acquired and maintained by the liberal use of the sword or by accident of birth. The emperor is truly an effect of his representations.

Any image, then, that seemed to pronounce the fallibility and merely human status of the emperor would certainly constitute a contravention of the category of conventional imperial representations, and would, on that account, I contend, be both unexpected and unlikely for contemporary viewers. I would stress here that this argument concerns the notion of the expectations aroused by the category of images only, irrespective of whether observers believed as true or not what those images proclaimed about the emperors. In other words, the issue relates to the effectiveness and durability of a category of representation, separated off from questions concerning the truth-value of the message of its images. The contravention of expectation that would result from the reading of the mosaic so far suggested would occur not because nobody believed the emperor to be irreproachable, but rather because it is unlikely that anybody would consider as possible in an imperial representation the declaration that he was not.

What is more, we can detect this sensitivity to the contravened category of imperial representations in those same texts on which modern authors base their readings. In the lines of Mauropous, the sense of the phrase revolves about the contradiction between the position of the emperor as absolute chief and holder of power on the one hand, yet also as powerless and fully subservient on the other. In fact, if this contradiction were not apparent to Mauropous, the lines would not be worth recording. One does not think anything strange of an ordinary mortal in humility; that is unremarkable. An emperor, however, is something else. It runs against the grain, and deserves some comment. Similarly, the story of Basil being willing to throw himself on the ground at the Ecumenical Council of 869 would hardly be worth mentioning if it were not considered extraordinary that an emperor, invested with maximum power and authority, should be submitted to such a show of powerlessness and subjection.

Modern authors too, I suspect, have an awareness of this issue, and it is probably this that accounts for the concerted drive to find a personal narrative underpinning the image that has characterized so much of the current scholarship on the mosaic. It is the very interpretation of the image as being so imperially modest in its intimations of sin, fallibility, and

ordinary humanity – concepts which have no place in the imperial ideal – that makes the image such a rarity in the category of imperial representations. This in turn appears to generate the conviction that something extraordinary must account for its production. For if a causal narrative can be located, then the apparent humility will have been explained, and the image effectively withdrawn from the category, its integrity preserved.

The modern author most overtly sensitive to these issues is, unsurprisingly, Grabar, whose book *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin* is nothing other than an engagement with the whole question of imperial representations as a distinct category. It is no doubt difficulties of the sort that we have just been discussing that led him in that work to pointedly, if cryptically, reject a reading of the sort so far considered, and suggest another. In a phrase remarkable for its dense summation of a whole ideology, he writes: "From the point of view of imperial iconography . . . the attitude of *proskynesis* of the basileus cannot be interpreted otherwise than as a gesture of adoration (or prayer) of the 'autocrator' addressed to the heavenly Pantocrator."[24]

Grabar here seems to be specifically excluding the possibility that the gesture of *proskynesis* would be taken as an admission of imperial fallibility and sinfulness. His reading of the gesture instead stands at the opposite end of the spectrum to sin and judgment. He places the mosaic firmly within the mainstream of imperial art, considering the scene to be depicting the privileged relationship between the emperor and Christ, relating to his supreme political and social status. The emperor is taken to be adoring his immediate overlord, from whom his own immense power springs.[25]

The distinctive feature of Grabar's reading is that he considers not just the generalized meaning of *proskynesis*, but the way in which its meaning is modified through contact with the category of imperial representation. I am in full agreement with his conclusions, especially if we rephrase the question along the lines suggested earlier concerning a broad, public domain meaning, or the likely interpretation that a neutral Byzantine observer of the image might derive from it. For it is on that observer that the workings of the category of imperial representations would have their strongest effect. We will return to a fuller discussion of that meaning shortly, but for the moment, let us turn to a more general consideration of intention.

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[24] Grabar, *L'empereur*, 102.

[25] Grabar, *L'empereur*, 100–06. Brubaker's argument seen above (p. 66) clearly falls into this camp as well.

We have so far mounted an argument against the reading of imperial fallibility for the lunette mosaic partly by swapping out intention (which was the frame in which that reading was originally set by its proponents) for public reception. Yet, as we shall see, intention is not so easily left by the wayside, and we need to consider in greater detail the relation between it and public reception. The argument that follows is complex in parts, and there are no easy resolutions to the questions under consideration; however, an understanding of the varying strands that make up the issue will be essential for our ultimate conclusions concerning the mosaic.

Let us begin by returning to the Oikonomides contention, and consider a different scenario to the one we have discussed. Let us presume for a moment that Oikonomides is indeed correct, and the mosaic was commissioned by the Patriarch with the aim of humiliating the emperor. The foregoing discussion allows us to pose a further, crucial question of that reading: what would the situation with regard to the meaning of the scene be if the public entirely missed this interpretation, and did not grasp the message as "intended?" Would that message still count as the meaning?

This question goes straight to the heart of the issue underlying our whole discussion of what does and does not constitute the meaning of the scene. The same question, of course, applies to the coin of Isaac. In both these cases, "meaning" proliferates, and we are presented with the fact that intention may well differ from received meaning. We are thus led directly to the position of writers such as Fish and Ricoeur concerning polysemy: the idea that meaning is, of its very nature, ambiguous.[26]

However, a question that still remains, even when the emphasis shifts to polysemy, is where intention sits in relation to the idea of multiple meanings. Here we may return to the point made earlier, that intentions of the sort ascribed to the emperor (or Patriarch) are logically posterior to the broad, pan-personal meanings that are the common property of the wider interpretive community. These intentions are personal narratives, private associations that are based on and draw upon those broader meanings. They are impossible without them.

This process of personal associations, however, is not unique to patrons. Anyone confronting an unknown work will, of necessity, have access to the same broad meanings. And each viewer may draw upon them in exactly the same way, through a series of personal connections and associations relating the broad themes to their own personal lives and private histories. This

[26] See S. Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980); P. Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. D. Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974).

process of constructing an individualized personal narrative is integral to the function of viewer interpretation. One must conclude, then, that intention is really just one person's interpretation, one of many possible personal associations, of meditations upon a theme.

Yet, although this last formulation may be true from a hermeneutic point of view, it misses two of the central tenets inherent in the logic of the term "intention." In the first place, there is something counterintuitive about calling intention simply "a" meaning, one of many. The term is usually used as that which determines meaning. It seems to precede meaning, and consequently is what people seek in order to "discover" meaning. In the second place, the formulation overlooks another essential feature of intention, which is its coercive quality. "Intention" distinguishes itself from "interpretation" in that it attempts to convey a particular message. An intention, by its nature, seeks or assumes that a set, defined meaning will be imposed on the audience. Structured into it is a will to convey something specific, to control the audience interpretation, and to force it to arrive at a particular reading. Intention and interpretation may be the same in terms of their common reliance on a public core meaning, but they differ in terms of their active, persuasive or passive, receptive qualities.

What is more, in opposition to the multiple-interpretation theory, intention carries with it severe restrictions concerning what it sees as permissible or desirable interpretations. Unlike the multiple-interpretation hypothesis, which takes all readings made by members of an interpretive community as equally valid,[27] intention brings with it a system of right and wrong meanings. Oddly enough, however, it does not necessarily follow from this that the intention is the "correct" meaning. The question of right or wrong is liable to invert itself in certain situations, as in the case of Isaac's coin. Here, we can legitimately say that it is the majority interpretation that is the correct one, not the patron's. It is not the public who "misinterpreted" the image, but Isaac who issued the "wrong" scene in terms of what he wanted to convey. He miscalculated, and the image backfired, to the point of exposing its author to ridicule.[28]

There is a contradiction, then, between the coercive assumptions that intention makes, which is that the work will mean just and only what its

[27] See particularly the work of Fish for this position.

[28] This opens the way to a topic not often enough considered, especially by intentionalists, to whom one would have thought it would be a subject of major interest: the art "mistake." See however, the intriguing article by A. Eastmond, "An Intentional Error? Imperial Art and 'Mis'-Interpretation under Andronikos I Komnenos," *Art Bulletin* 76 (1994): 502–10, which combines a discussion of the topic with an anti-intentionalist position.

patron wants it to mean, and the way in which meaning actually unfolds of itself. The intention–coercion, so clear to the patron that it appears that it cannot fail to operate, may remain obscure to observers, not standing out above a whole range of other connotations. The relationship between patron and image and viewer and image is asymmetric. What is evident to one is not to the other. This is precisely because intention is in fact only one of many possible meanings. The coercive assumptions on which it is based are false, resting on the error that symbols and their interpretation are capable of being entirely controlled and manipulated by one person. It is this that reveals intention for the fallacy it is, and it is also owing to this fallacy that intention appears to stand as the fount and origin of meaning, rather than following on from it. As we have seen on several occasions, however, meaning cannot be restricted by the force of will of one agent. No one privileged individual can control the symbolic process. Intention in art, one may say, is frustrated desire.

Despite this, however, intention comes to pose a problem for questions of meaning and interpretation. Precisely because of the illusion that it operates under – that meaning can be controlled – the fallacy comes to be structured into the work itself by the beliefs of agents engaged with the image themselves; both patrons and viewers alike mistakenly believe that intention really can do what it believes it can do. This knot at the heart of the issue means that one is never able to arrive at anything like a satisfactory conclusion to the problem of intention, no matter which way one turns. What would appear to be the obvious solution, to relate the two systems to each other, is in fact no real solution at all. The two positions are irreconcilable. Treat of multiple interpretations, and one seems to be denying the very core of intention. Obey the coercions of intention, as intentionalists do, and one ends up in manifest falsehood. Yet to discount intention, strong though the temptation may be, would be to ignore a feature that is more than likely "built into" the work if the patron in fact does have a specific intention. Fallacy or willful historical disregard are the only choices available if one follows through to its end the inherent logic of each position.

The best that one can do, then, is not only to bear each position in mind, but to bear in mind as well that each position is contradictory of the other. Typically, however, this is easier said than done, and it is not for no reason that writers almost universally follow only the path of intention. To ignore the other side of the story, however, and, in the case of the lunette mosaic, to pursue the issue solely in terms of the emperor's intention, is to risk ever

more recondite explanations that drift ever further away from publicly accessible core meanings, and thus, almost paradoxically, become ever less likely as intentions as well. However, to phrase the issue as one of alternate possible meanings, some of which may have been desired by patrons but missed by observers, while others were picked up by observers, even though not intended by patrons (as happened with the coin of Isaac), is to set up an entirely different problematic of pictures; it raises the possibility of various paths followed to meaning, and signposts missed by those on both sides of the meaning divide.

Although the above formulation of balancing intention and reception appears to be even-handed in the face of an impossible situation, there is one further issue that requires examination, and it concerns the very plausibility of some of the kinds of intentions that we have been discussing. In the material so far covered, the intentions encountered can be subdivided into two types. One of them concerns the obscure personal histories that are supposed to lie behind the *proskynesis* scene; here intention is often taken to consist of private associations, based upon the vicissitudes of personal predilection. However, it is necessary to distinguish between that type of intention and a second, which operates on a more broadly accessible, public level. In the case of the coin, for example, we can be fairly sure of what the patron desired to communicate. It is clear both as an intention and as a public-domain meaning. The first type of intention, however, poses much greater problems, not only in connection with difficulties of public access, but more fundamentally, in relation to the question of whether intentions of this nature were even possible within the context of Byzantine and medieval art in general.

Surely, the model for this idea of a highly personalized narrative is based much on our own post-Romantic notions of the creative act, the imperative of expressing one's own deeply private "self," one's personal fascinations and fixations in art. A question that needs to be asked, however, is whether the Byzantines were as prone to this way of thinking about art as we are. Medieval art, we know, is conceptually different, less "personalized" than later art. Indicators of this range from the lack of distinctive artists' personalities to the relative standardization of subject matter. Given these factors, we cannot simply assume that images would have been put to the same kind of personalized uses that we now accept automatically. Indeed, it is unlikely that the kind of intention that we have been discussing here was even conceptually possible. I would argue that there was simply no opportunity within the Byzantine attitude to art for intentions of this

sort of to arise in the first place.[29] Art would function rather under a broader type of category so that its "intention" is generally accessible, as when, for example, emperors participate in an ancient tradition of depicting themselves in privileged contact with Christ. I would argue as well that there is nothing more cryptically personal than this sort of public intention behind the emperor in *proskynesis*.

* * *

With these thoughts in mind, let us return to further consideration of the scene itself. In *L'empereur dans l'art byzantine*, Grabar had drawn a connection between the mosaic and ceremonies performed by the emperor on the occasions of his participation in church services. As described by Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos in his *Book of Ceremonies*, at the Imperial Door, above which the mosaic is located, the emperor performed *proskynesis* before entering the church with the Patriarch.[30]

Grabar himself thought of the mosaic as being a direct representation of that scene, a claim disputed by Mango and Oikonomides. They point out that the scene does not correspond in some of its details to the ceremony as described by Constantine, where, for example, the emperor had already removed his crown in the southwest vestibule of the church, before entering the narthex and performing the *proskynesis*.[31] Nonetheless, the association between the ritual and the mosaic has continued to provide a fertile point of discussion, notably in the recent studies of Gilbert Dagron and Robert Nelson, and their work will prove useful to us in our own interpretation.

Dagron, in addition to considering the ritual, adds a further important element to Grabar's contention. He reads both image and ritual contextually, in relation to a larger theme concerning the fundamental tension between political and religious powers in Byzantium. Signficantly as well, he bases his overall argument on that of Oikonomides, already discussed above.

[29] For a related critique of the particular conception of the self on which the idea of self-expression is based, and its difference from Byzantine notions of the self, see Ivan Drpić, "The Patron's "I": Art, Selfhood, and the Later Byzantine Dedicatory Epigram," *Speculum* 89 (October 2014): 895–935. For more on this, see Chapter 4, note 20.

[30] Grabar, *L'empereur*, 101; Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos, *Book of Ceremonies* 1,1, p. 14.

[31] C. Mango in Kähler and Mango, *Hagia Sophia*, 54, and Oikonomides, "Leo VI," 156. For more on this topic, and for a related dispute concerning a putative relationship between Church ritual and representation in connection with the imperial panels at San Vitale, Ravenna, see Chapter 5.

Before iconoclasm, writes Dagron, the emperor asserted the rights of both king and chief priest. After iconoclasm, however, the Patriarchs were less inclined to accept the claims of spiritual leadership of the emperors, and became increasingly assertive over their own domains. Dagron understands the ritual and the mosaic that he sees as based upon it as designed to demonstrate the hegemony of the Patriarch within the sacred space of Hagia Sophia, and the secondary status of the emperor in this regard. The ultimate message of the image is thus taken to be declaring that within the church it is the Patriarch who is fundamentally in charge.[32]

It will be evident that although Dagron does not hinge his reading on the personalized narratives used by Oikonomides, his argument is, at its core, essentially the same. He accepts the fundamental premise that the image is polemical in nature, with the goal of asserting Patriarchal dominance at the cost of imperial humiliation. Given the extensive overlap between the two interpretations, the counterarguments offered earlier in this chapter apply in the same degree. Nonetheless, embedded within Dagron's argument is a further point that is of importance for us concerning the location of both mosaic and ritual, a point that Nelson, too, discusses. Before examining it in futher detail, however, let us turn momentarily to the broader discussion of Nelson.

In his examination of the mosaic, Nelson differs from Dagron in two primary respects. In the first place, he severs the causal connection between the ritual and the mosaic, stating that the image should not be seen as an illustration of the ceremony performed at the door. Instead, he proposes that both be understood as operating jointly, each enhancing the other. Together they form an expansive but coherent program, one that also includes further elements of the liturgy, as well as other visual representations in the vicinity.[33] In the second place, and of significance to us in our own counterargument just made above, there is no trace in his reading of any of the negative connotations concerning the emperor contained in Dagron's argument. Rather, Nelson stresses the impressive nature of the imperial ceremonial, contributing "to the authority and majesty of imperial

[32] G. Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, trans. J. Birrell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): on the general historical context, see pp. 3–8; for the mosaic itself, see pp. 99–124. Also see Hillsdale, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy*, 136–41, who also makes use of the Dagron argument in her discussion of both the emperor in *proskynesis* scene and the Constantine and Justinian panel in the southwest vestibule of the same church.

[33] R. Nelson, *Hagia Sophia, 1850–1950: Holy Wisdom, Modern Monument* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 9–13.

power," and he highlights the solemnity and dignity of the program as a whole.[34]

With these thoughts in mind, if we return now to Dagron and strip out of his argument not only the putative intention of the Patriarch, but the negative aspersions as well, we find a minimal proposition of considerable consequence: the Imperial Door constitutes a threshold that demarcates a specific zone beyond which the very nature of imperial power changes. The emperor now enters a special space that is radically different from the one he usually inhabits and in which he reigns supreme. Both the *proskynesis* ceremony and the image itself, we may say, mark this particular transition. This is the limit at which even the emperor must bow to his superior. From this point on, the nature of the space itself changes.

In connection with this notion of the Church of Hagia Sophia itself constituting a zone of exception in relation to the usual norms of imperial power, it is interesting to return to the other images in the church showing emperors in contact with holy figures, already discussed in the previous chapter; these are the two south gallery panels of Constantine Monomachos with Zoe and John Komnenos with Irene, as well as the Constantine and Justinian panel in the southwest vestibule.[35] Casting our eye over all these panels as a whole, we might say that the most significant image is the one that is not there: an imperial coronation, an omission made all the more significant by the fact that many coronations, in reality, took place in the building.[36] In marked distinction to coronation scenes, which manifest in the most direct fashion the strongest claim to an unalloyed form of imperial power, these other imperial panels declare a rather different theme: "In here, the emperors work for the benefit of this church in particular." The emperors construct the building, give it gifts of money and privilege, and bend the knee to God, to whose glory it stands as witness. Indeed, all these scenes talk up the status of Hagia Sophia as the centerpiece of religious life in the empire. The prime subject in all of them is therefore not the emperors themselves, nor their source of power, but the special standing of the church itself. We might qualify this as their dominant theme.

The sub-dominant theme, however, especially for the gallery panels and the Constantine and Justinian scene, is, indeed, the emperors, but now it is their particular role in the sustenance of this special church that is

[34] Nelson, *Hagia Sophia*, 9. [35] See Chapter 1, pp. 28–31 and 37–39.

[36] The description is contained in Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos, *Book of Ceremonies*, 1,38, p. 191. See Dagron, *Emperor and Priest*, 54–83, especially 70ff. for detailed discussion and further bibliography.

highlighted. This is, however, a two-way street, a closed circle of mutual benefit to both parties. The supreme status of the church itself is constantly reaffirmed by having none other than a string of emperors sponsoring it, sustaining it, standing behind it. And within the sub-dominant theme, for all, the *proskynesis* scene included, even though pure power is no longer the subject, there can be no doubt that this is an extraordinary relationship; imperial privilege is still declared in the strongest possible terms (a subject to which we will return shortly). If the primary theme reads as "*even emperors* work for this church," the secondary theme reads as "*only* emperors have a special connection with *this church*."

This said, however, there is still a marked difference between the *proskynesis* scene and the others. In Chapter 1 we discussed the panels of Constantine Monomachos with Zoe and John Komnenos with Irene in relation to the delicate balance they maintain between their valences of power and what we labeled as imperial piety. The *proskynesis* mosaic is clearly even further down the scale from overt declarations of power than those other scenes, and correspondingly makes a greater show of piety. Without toppling automatically into the negative argument of humiliation, this notion of imperial piety deserves further exploration.[37]

In this connection, it is tantalizing to recall the inscription that was placed in the semidome of the church itself. These words, standing near to the scene of the Virgin and Child with angels, newly restored after the iconoclast controversy, read: "The images which the imposters had cast down here, the pious emperors have again set up."[38] When seen in relation to this statement, the *proskynesis* mosaic seems to contain the very image of a pious emperor. As with the imperial ceremonial, this is not to posit that the image is directly translating the words into visual form; it is to suggest, however, that the notion of imperial piety was one that was abroad, specifically within the sacred space constituted by Hagia Sophia.

In sum, then, the image is perhaps best seen as an attempt to develop a new imperial iconography fitting to the specific nature that the particular space of Hagia Sophia bore to imperial power. This is God's house, the scene says, and here the emperor pays tribute both to his direct overlord and to the sanctity of the space above whose threshold he hovers.

With these thoughts, we fill out our ideas concerning the meaning of the image itself. Yet, having said this, we should be wary of reductively

[37] Nelson, *Hagia Sophia*, 13, also mentions that the emperor constitutes a model of "pious behaviour."

[38] C. Mango and E. Hawkins, "The Apse Mosaics of S. Sophia at Istanbul," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 19 (1965): 113–51, at 125.

declaring any kind of certainty too soon. We still need to return to several of the points raised before. In the first place, the argument just outlined concerning imperial piety should be examined in relation to each of the two topics discussed earlier in connection with meaning, public reception, and intention. Although I do believe that the interpretation of imperial piety is most likely in each of these domains, as we will see, that interpretation also "reads" differently in each mode.

Concerning intention, we may consider the image to be an attempt to produce a scene that meets a challenging brief: how to develop a new image that represents no less than the emperor himself in a display of piety, as appropriate to this particular place and this particular setting. From this point of view the meaning of imperial piety fits perfectly.

In relation to public reception, however, the situation is entirely different. Here, we return to our point regarding the profound deviation of the emperor in *proskynesis* from everything else in standard imperial iconography, and the effect this might have had on viewers. As discussed earlier the sight of the emperor in this position might well have been surprising, perhaps even astonishing.

Against this possibility of public surprise, it may be contended that such a response on the part of viewers is unlikely given familiarity with the *proskynesis* performed during the imperial ceremonial. However, the argument made earlier in this chapter concerns the idea of a set of images with a series of imperatives, expectations, and interpretive strategies pertaining to it precisely in its property as a category of representation; and this category is distinct from others with their own interpretive rules, such as, for example, "real life" or ritual.[39] Many a slip is possible twixt all these fields, and one cannot automatically presume that a gesture familiar in one will remain so when appearing in another, especially if its presence there is unusual.

The point thus concerns not simply how imperial *proskynesis* should be interpreted as a gesture in the absolute (that it is a statement of "lesser-ness" is clear), but how that gesture itself would be read *in an image* within a genre that has long done nothing but declare imperial potency. Given this, I suggest that that the interpretation most likely to have been arrived at would, indeed, as we have just said, concern imperial piety, but the scene would still have been, at the least, surprising, and would probably have given viewers considerable pause for thought.

[39] In this respect, see the fascinating series of essays in D. Cannadine and S. Price (eds.), *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

It is clear as well that the designers of the scene were to some degree aware of the difficulties involved. In addition to dealing with the piety aspect of their brief, they have also attempted to give the imperial component its full due. The image makes clear that *imperial* piety is still something extraordinary. The emperor is indeed prostrate, but it is after all still the emperor, in full regalia, and with a crown on his head. He rests not on the floor, as supplicants usually do in our contact portraits (compare Theodore Metochites in the Kariye Camii, Istanbul, in Fig. 0.1), but on a cushion. Humble and pious he is, but in a way that only someone uniquely, directly elected by God could be.

Yet, despite all this, the image still sends out two contradictory sets of messages. As much as it insists on the status of the emperor on the one hand, on the other, an *image* of an emperor in *proskynesis* undermines this status. Piety, the scene attempts to tell us, is not incompatible with power and prestige. But, as is the case with a political speech, to declare is not necessarily to convince. At root, the motif of the emperor in this position in an image constitutes something of a transgression, however one looks at it.

In terms of its reception, then, even if we state that the core meaning is imperial piety, we still need to add that this is not an image that rests easily within the interpretive faculties (as the quantity of scholarship attests). The placement of the scene and the associated imperial ceremony may well have helped establish that interpretation as the meaning, but would not necessarily quiet the unease produced by the image itself as contravention.

In this respect, as much as the scene differs from standard imperial iconography, its considerable deviation from the few other scenes where the subject is also imperial piety, as discussed in the previous chapter, is of great significance too. In the Justinian panel in San Vitale, piety is shown by not much more than participation in the procession. The weight of the scene thus falls mostly on Justinian's regal bearing. Even more important, however, are the imperial panels in the south gallery of Hagia Sophia that we have been looking at, completed after the *proskynesis* mosaic. Even though they do not revert to quite the degree of majesty that Justinian displays, they certainly wind back some of the extraordinary piety of the *proskynesis* scene, and return to a more dignified posture. In a sense, we might see the *proskynesis* mosaic as an experiment in an attempt to reach the unattainable goal of representing, in imperial art, and in accordance with the specific set of circumstances, the necessary degree of piety with a sufficient degree of power and prestige. In a standard contact portrait, of course, with lesser mortals involved, this tradeoff does not apply; as George

of Antioch at the Church of the Martorana in Palermo shows, the more extreme the piety and humility, the better (Fig. 1.26).

In sum, then, the response as to what the meaning of the scene is should take the form of a brief narrative or explanation. We have a likely understanding of what the intention might have been, and of what it was trying to achieve. Yet, even more important than this is the reception of the scene, of the possibility that it presents of an interpretation arrived at, yet uncomfortably, awkwardly held, and of the divergence this demonstrates between intention and reception. In a sense, the meaning *is* this divergence between the two, in the fact that simple meaning settles down nowhere – neither in intention nor even in reception. Perhaps this very instability, not by design, but in result, constitutes the greatest interest of the image from an art-historical point of view.

* * *

The above discussion has been pursued in relation to a single, unusual image that poses several complex problems of interpretation. In the majority of conventional contact portraits, to which we now turn our attention in the following chapters, such problems generally do not arise to the same degree. Yet the lessons learnt about intention apply across the board. On the one hand, it is difficult to ignore the call that portraits make to the sphere of the personal. In that the person represented within the image is more often than not the same person who is controlling it from without, the meaning of the image would seem to be nothing other than what they wished it to mean. Portraiture, in short, is the one domain of art where intention would seem to have the strongest claim to validity and purchase.

The foregoing analysis, however, allows us to see the shortcomings of this approach. In the first place, the form of intention under which many scholars have pursued the meaning of the scene, dealing with a highly personalized narrative, in all probability did not yet exist when the image was produced. For the contact portraits with which we are concerned, even considering the less extreme form of intention – public domain intention, as we labeled it – it is seldom that there would be any divergence between that intention and publicly received meaning. Indeed, even on the rare occasion when that divergence does appear, as in the *proskynesis* mosaic, fascinating though it is to observe, intention still does not determine or delimit meaning. The search for intention in pursuit of meaning is misplaced. As we concluded earlier, intention is a subset of meaning, not vice versa.

Portraits, then, are a less unlikely subject to choose for an avowedly anti-intentionalist study than would at first appear to be the case. They allow us to pose in particularly stark terms the relation of the individual to meaning. In that portraiture is the strongest bastion of intention, it is the ideal ground on which to demonstrate that meaning lies elsewhere, in structures of belief, habit, and practice, those larger backdrops that exceed the individual, and against which individual agency takes place. It is to those features, in relation to contact portraits, that we now turn.

3 Awaiting the End after the End: Sin, Absolution, and the Afterlife

The most impressive Last Judgment to have survived from Byzantium and its sphere of influence, the one at Sta. Maria Assunta in Torcello, provides a magnificent vision of that most cataclysmic of events (twelfth century, Fig. 3.1).[1] At the decisive moment, judgment is rendered, and the regime of the future, for all futures, begins its eternal reign. Saved or damned? Heaven beckons, fiery Hell threatens.[2]

With its stark choice of blessed and damned, pleasure and pain, the Last Judgment sets the agenda for every Christian. However, for the supplicants who appear in our portraits it is safe to assume that it has particular relevance. Everything within the contact portrait is geared toward it; it provides the conceptual schema against which the person portrayed formulates his or her desires. "Choose your path," the scene says, "for reckoning is coming," and in many ways supplicants have already made their choice. Yet they are also doing considerably more than just making a choice. In giving voice to their requests, they are proactively (as we might say today) also taking steps to ensure that proceedings will unfold as they would like them to. In effect, they are projecting an event at which they will be present, and attempting to influence its outcome. In short, it

1 I. Andreescu, "Torcello. I. Le Christ inconnu. II. Anastasis et Jugement Dernier: têtes vraies, têtes fausses," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 26 (1972): 183–224; O. Demus, "Studies among the Torcello Mosaics," *Burlington Magazine* 82–83 (1943–44): 136–41; R. Polacco, *La Cattedrale di Torcello* (Venice: L'Altra Riva, 1984), especially 137–46.

2 On the Last Judgment in general, see Y. Christe, *Jugements derniers* (Saint-Léger-Vauban: Zodiaque, 1999). For Byzantine Last Judgments, see B. Brenk, "Die Anfänge der byzantinistischen Weltgerichtsdarstellung," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 57 (1964): 106–26; B. Brenk, *Tradition und Neuerung in der christlichen Kunst des ersten Jahrtausends: Studien zur Geschichte des Weltgerichsbildes* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1966); S. Der Nersessian, "Program and Iconography of the Frescoes of the Parecclesion," in P. Underwood, *The Kariyeh Djami*, 4 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), vol IV, 303–49, at 325–31; S. Jónsdóttir, *An 11th Century Byzantine Last Judgment in Iceland* (Reykjavik: Almenna Bókafélagið, 1959), 15–26; D. Milošević, *Das jüngste Gericht* (Recklinghausen: A. Bongers, 1963); and J. Laffin, "What Happened to the Last Judgement in the Early Church?" in P. Clarke and T. Clayton (eds.), *The Church, the Afterlife, and the Fate of the Soul*, Studies in Church History 45 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 20–30.



Figure 3.1: Last Judgment, mosaic on west wall, Church of Sta. Maria Assunta, Torcello, twelfth century.

might be said that supplicants have, in their imagination, already begun their journey into the afterlife.

Yet the scenario that is projected in the mind's eye of each person, it turns out, entails considerably more than a simple deed of judgment itself. Some of that "more" is already cued by the representation of the Last Judgment. For the scene is much broader than a simple statement of a split in the road, a choice in which there are only two, well-known, possibilities; more, even, than just a carrot and stick. Hardly a spare statement, it develops its theme amply with a large number of additional narrative details whose overall purpose is to enhance the dramatic experience of the event. Indeed, it is these extra details that convert what might otherwise have been a stark, uninspired image into the magnificent vision that it is. Trumpets sound, angels fly, saints gather. Within the heart of the image, the scenes of Heaven and Hell, much extra attention is lavished on "atmospheric" details. Worms crawl through the eye-sockets of skulls in flaming fires (Fig. 3.2), contrasting markedly with the palm trees that bloom in Paradise as kindly old Abraham cradles an innocent soul in his lap (Fig. 3.3).The whole scene is a triumph of almost novelistic detail hung on a choice of skeletal simplicity: within everlasting life, will yours be pleasure or pain?

These details link the scenes to a larger scenario that relates strongly to the project of the supplicant – one, in fact, of which the Last Judgment is itself but a component: the afterlife in general. Stretching in time from the moment of personal death until the Final Coming, the afterlife is a complex, sprawling time and place, populated with a riot of strange personalities and even stranger, raucous adventures. Jane Baun, in her reading of Last Judgment scenes, proposes that they may have been approached as though each small component were something like a theatrical vignette that a viewer might enter, like a participant in a play.[3] We might say the same of the afterlife in general. When someone commissions a contact portrait or makes a gift, they imagine a whole scenario unfolding, a complex web of images and ideas that surrounds their activity as supplicant. These, too, may be conceived of as a variety of preestablished scenarios that are believed will be encountered, and it is from those options that they hope to avoid some and achieve others.[4] In this sense we may say

[3] J. Baun, *Tales from Another Byzantium: Celestial Journey and Local Community in the Medieval Greek Apocrypha* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 154–56.

[4] This idea of projecting oneself into an imagined scenario also has parallels to the rhetorical genre of *ethopoiia* as articulated by Ivan Drpić in his work on dedicatory epigrams. In *ethopoiia*, an author places themself in the position of someone who is (usually) at a critical juncture in their

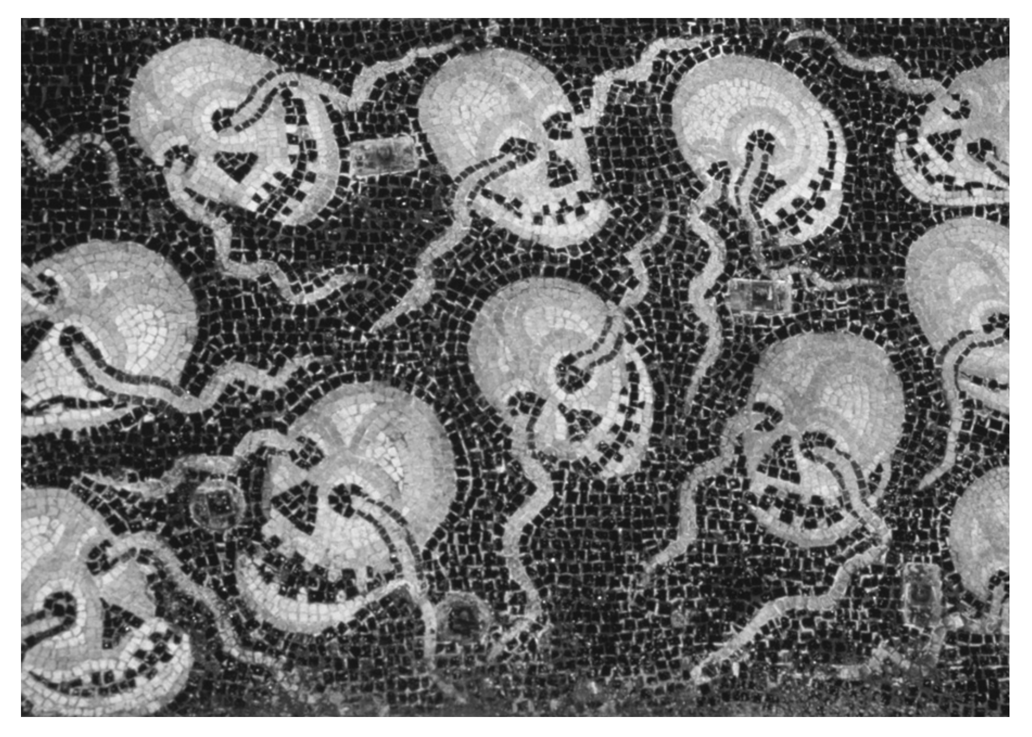


Figure 3.2: Detail, Hell, Last Judgment, Church of Sta. Maria Assunta, Torcello, twelfth century.

that it is the afterlife that elicits the gift. The supplication is made in anticipation of what lies ahead, of what it is hoped will be achieved. In this respect, the afterlife is not so much background context as foreground cause.

In both this chapter and the next we will be focusing primarily on donor portraits and, even more specifically, on the gift represented within it, since it is clearly the element that is thought to be efficacious in achieving what the supplicant desires. Yet, as much as the gift seeks a specific outcome in the afterlife, it is far from being alone in this endeavor. The sprawling field of the afterlife, the theatrical set just referred to, is bristling with tales and adventures all of which deal, in some measure, with the tricky business of sin, punishment, absolution, and salvation. The gifts that the portraits depict are thus but one technique amongst many by which salvation might be accomplished.

life, and then envisages in detail how that individual might feel, articulating their words and emotions in the first person. Drpić finds a strong similarity between the impulses of self-projection at work in the genre and in dedicatory epigrams, and the same may be said with regard to the supplicants of our contact portraits and their relation to the afterlife. See Drpić, "The Patron's 'I'," 907–09.



Figure 3.3: Detail, Paradise, Last Judgment, Church of Sta. Maria Assunta, Torcello, twelfth century.

This field of the afterlife is not one that is well founded on a solid scriptural or theological base. Rather, it is something that emerges from an uncodified, additive agglomeration of texts, narratives, debates, images, and practices. However, as this chapter demonstrates, when all the material that it comprises is taken together and collated, a defined field of operations emerges. This field might be described as an ecosystem, or an economy or, indeed, without meaning anything disparaging by it, a game. It has power holders, power brokers, negotiators, and spoilers, but it also has a limited and defined set of codes, rules, and sanctioned moves. Thus, more than just one technique amongst many, the gift is also a player in a large-scale game, operating within a highly restricted, pre-established field.

As a first step to understanding the gift, therefore, we need to understand the broader environment within which it is a participant. These various factors – the game of which it is part, and the techniques, strategies, and rules within it – form an essential part of the meaning of the gift. Strangely enough, however, once this field is analyzed, it will be seen that gifts fit into it nowhere. In the first place, no mention is made of them in

any of the sources. Further, as will become evident, not only do they not conform to any of the standard modes of operation found elsewhere in the field, but their own functioning is itself opaque and difficult to grasp in the first instance. Gifts are participants in a game, but are not of it.

Over the course of the next two chapters we will see that the reason for this strange phenomenon is that the gift is constitutionally different from all the other sin-loosing techniques encountered. It does, indeed, have its own distinctive mode of functioning, but this occurs within structures that are not immediately evident at first sight; rather, it operates on a "deeper" structural level than the other techniques. That deeper structural level, however, is only revealed when the entire field of the afterlife is subjected to intensive, analytic scrutiny. The argument will be made that, although it is an outsider in the game, the gift addresses specific issues and difficulties that arise in relation to the overall field of operations that is the afterlife.

In the first instance, then, this chapter aims to interrogate the afterlife not as the near-random, aggregate collection of ideas it first seems to be, but as a complex system, bearing deep structure at its core. Within this investigation there are extended sections where the gift makes few appearances, since it does not form a part of the material out of which the major part of the afterlife is constructed. However, the reader is asked to bear in mind that, despite this, we are always still in search of the gift itself. If the gift works within the parameters and structures established by the field of the afterlife, this also means that those structures predetermine what shape the gift takes, and what it means. This applies to both components of meaning discussed earlier, the passive and the active.[5] We will return to the gift itself periodically in this chapter, but a full accounting of it in relation to the structures that emerge in the afterlife must wait until the end of the next chapter; only then will we have developed a sufficiently detailed picture to grasp fully its significance and activities.

Before proceeding to the analysis of the afterlife, the chapter begins with a brief, critical overview of its historical development, with an eye to factors that are of significance for contact portraits themselves.

* * *

If, as we commented above, the imaginary world of our supplicants is fed by the Last Judgment and the afterlife, it is also the case that both of these are themselves also products of the workings of the imagination. To start with the Last Judgment, the form that the image takes in the Torcello mosaic, with its distinctive layout, had only been settled upon shortly

[5] See above, Introduction, pp. 7–8.

before the mosaic was executed; the earliest surviving appearance of the schema is in a Gospel book of the third quarter of the eleventh century, today in Paris (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, gr. 74, fol. 51v, Fig. 3.4).[6] An earlier version of the schema can be seen in a ninth-century manuscript of the Sacra Parallela, also in Paris (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, gr. 923, fol. 68v, Fig. 3.5).[7] At the top of the image, Christ sits enthroned. Below him are two angels who hover above a group of the blessed, safely ensconced within the walls of Heaven. Below them are the rudiments of what will later become the fully elaborated Hell scenes. Within a flame-shaped enclosure, fires burn. A black Satan figure stands guard in front, a blue-gray serpent coiled around him. In his hand is an iron hook, to catch his victims. This image, with its four-tier arrangement, is clearly recognizable for showing the basic scaffolding upon which the later images will grow, yet it obviously has nothing of their amplitude.

Although the iconographic development leading from the earlier to the later scenes is much studied and discussed, it is generally regarded as being an inevitable consequence of an artistic tradition still maturing and experimenting with forms.[8] Undoubtedly there is some measure of truth to this, yet the progressive evolution of the image should, in the first instance, be seen as a proof of something more: a hunger for ever more information about the post-death experience. That there would be a judgment, and that the consequences of that judgment were dire, was certain. Exactly how events would unfold on the fateful day, however, was never really elaborated by Christ himself in any specific detail. Even in the longest of the passages where he alludes to a coming day of judgment – Mathew 25: 31–46 – there is nothing that approaches the scope and scale of the vision that unfolds in the visual representation of the scene such as we find it from the eleventh century on. In fact, there is not any one single passage in the New Testament that corresponds to the events as depicted. Yet, almost paradoxically, it is the very absence of detailed information regarding the Last Judgment that allows for its development into its extraordinary final form. Unconstrained by scriptural limits, the field was both open and fertile, ripe for imaginative supplementation, itself impelled by the endless desire for a fuller scenario of what might happen on the fateful day.

The mature version of the scene thus accomplishes its feat by exploiting a vast array of sources that lay close to hand. The Old Testament, with its

[6] H. Omont, *Évangiles avec peintures byzantines du XIe siècle* (Paris: Berthaud, 1908).

[7] K. Weitzmann, *The Miniatures of the Sacra Parallela: Parisinus graecus 923* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 170.

[8] As in note 2 above.



Figure 3.4: Last Judgment, Gospel, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, gr. 74, fol. 51v, eleventh century.



Figure 3.5: Last Judgment, Sacra Parallela, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, gr. 923, fol. 68v, ninth century.

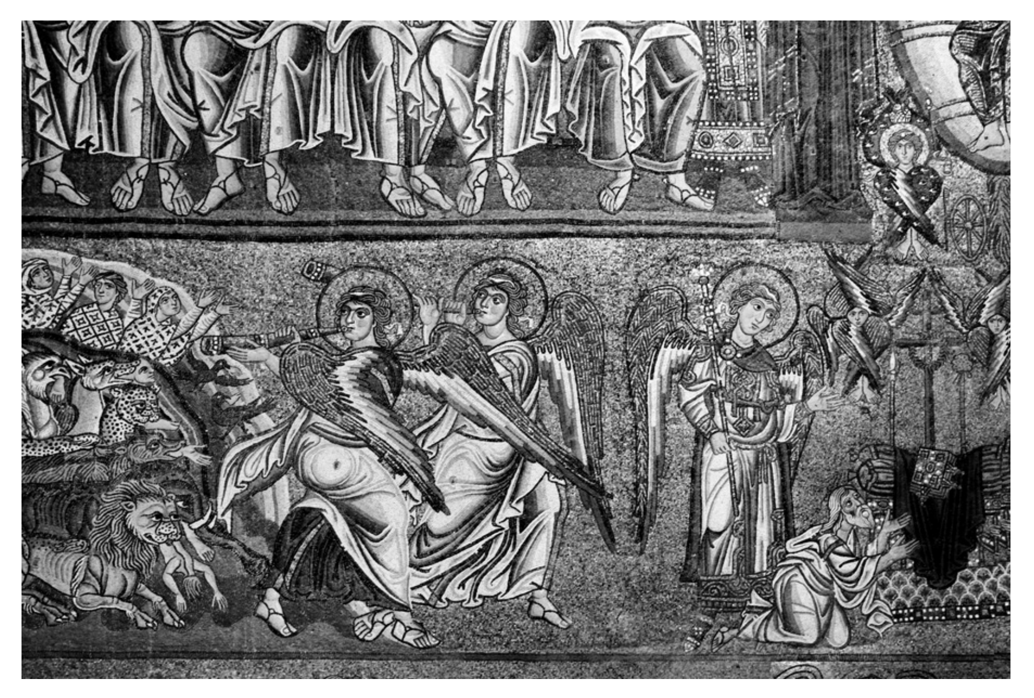


Figure 3.6: Detail, Last Judgment, Church of Sta. Maria Assunta, Torcello, twelfth century.

rich tradition of visionary prophecy, proved particularly suitable, as for instance in the stream of fire emanating from under Christ's mandorla and the two wheels straddling it. These derive from Daniel 7:9–10: "His throne was like the fiery flame, and his wheels as burning fire. A fiery stream issued forth." The New Testament too, provided material, as in the passage from 1 Corinthians 15:52: "The trumpets shall sound and the dead raised incorruptible."[9]

Perhaps the most unlikely scene in the image, however, can be found at the far left of the third row, where we see animals with parts of human bodies in their mouths (Fig. 3.6). This motif, although seemingly of a piece with the other tableaux, is remarkable for the fact that it is not based on scripture at all. Instead, as Voss first noted, the scene derives from the writings of Ephrem the Syrian, a writer of the fourth century. To our eyes now it may appear as though the animals, ferocious beasts all, are devouring the humans, but this is not the case; rather, it is the opposite. They are, instead, in the process of giving up the dead, which as Ephrem narrates, is

[9] Jónsdóttir, *11th Century*, 16–19, provides a concise listing of all the sources used.



Figure 3.7: Last Judgment, painting in eastern arch of the parekklesion, Kariye Camii, Istanbul, first quarter of the fourteenth century.

what will happen at Judgment Day.[10] It is this scene, perhaps, that testifies most eloquently to the appetite for additional material on the Last Judgment, and the corresponding impulse to embroider details around it.

The tendency toward amplification of the theme remains in place, even after the scene as a whole reaches its canonical formulation. The eastern arch of the parekklesion of the Kariye Camii houses a full Last Judgment, dating to the first quarter of the fourteenth century (Fig. 3.7).[11] On the western arch, facing this, is placed a scene of three infants tightly wrapped in swaddling clothes (the conventional Byzantine representation of souls) in the palm of a giant hand (Fig. 3.8). This derives from Wisdom of Solomon 3:1: "But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and the tortures of death shall not touch them."[12]

A further scene accompanying this Last Judgment illustrates the same point of amplification, but is also emblematic of a different, yet, in relation

[10] G. Voss, *Das jüngste Gericht in der bildenden Kunst des frühen Mittelalters* (Leipzig: E. A. Seemann, 1884).

[11] Der Nersessian, "Program and Iconography."

[12] Der Nersessian, "Program and Iconography," 331–32.



Figure 3.8: Souls in the palm of God’s hand, painting in western arch of the parekklesion, Kariye Camii, Istanbul, first quarter of the fourteenth century.

to contact portraits, even more important strand in the imagining of the afterlife. On the northwest pendentive of the eastern arch, an angel bends forward, and touches a small, nude figure on the head (Fig. 3.9). As Der Nersessian remarks, there is a long tradition of angels bearing the souls of the dead, but this image is unprecedented.[13] Now the process of continuous elaboration is put at the service of a single soul, rather than vast hordes. Here we have a solitary and moving moment of quiet extracted from the turmoil of the full, public scenario unfolding around it.

If, in the first instance, the progressive supplementation of the large-scale theme of the Last Judgment is one of the crucial factors on which the afterlife is based, the second is this aspect of the impact on one individual of those tumultuous events. If the former is cosmic and epic in scope, dealing with nothing less than the whole of humanity and the very end of time, the latter is personal and intimate, attempting to think through the way in which these grand themes will be lived at the level of the individual. Aided and abetted, as mentioned, by the vacuum left by scripture in this respect, these two poles of the cosmological and the personal form the basic armature on which the afterlife – and the contact portrait – is built.

Although the Kariye Camii image of the solitary soul is unusual in a Last Judgment scene, the process of the exploration of the effect of afterlife judgment on the individual was already under way much earlier. We see it to an even greater degree in the remarkable series of illustrations in a twelfth-century psalter of the Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos (Dionysiou ms. 65). The manuscript contains a standard contact portrait, showing a monk, Sabbas by name, in *proskynesis* before a standing Virgin and Child (fol. 12 v, Fig. 3.10). Preceding it, however, are two full-page illustrations, each divided into two registers. On fol. 11r, on the upper half of the page, Christ sits in a mandorla, surrounded by angels. His head is turned to the left. To the right a monk kneels in *proskynesis*, the result being that it appears that Christ is turning away from the monk, a hypothesis supported by the inscription, which reads "Woe is me, the sweet face turns away." The lower half of the page is taken up by the figure of the monk staring fixedly at a fire in front of him. Above him Christ appears again in a medallion (Fig. 3.11).

Fol. 11v, again divided into two registers, continues with the dark subject matter. Above is represented the instant of death, as a monk lying on a bed surrounded by his brethren literally gives up his soul, in the form of a naked child, to an angel. The inscription accompanying the scene says:

13 Der Nersessian, "Program and Iconography," 331–32.



Figure 3.9: Angel touches soul, detail, Last Judgment, Kariye Camii, Istanbul, first quarter of the fourteenth century.



Figure 3.10: Monk Sabbas before Virgin and Child, psalter, Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos, ms. 65, fol. 12v, twelfth century.

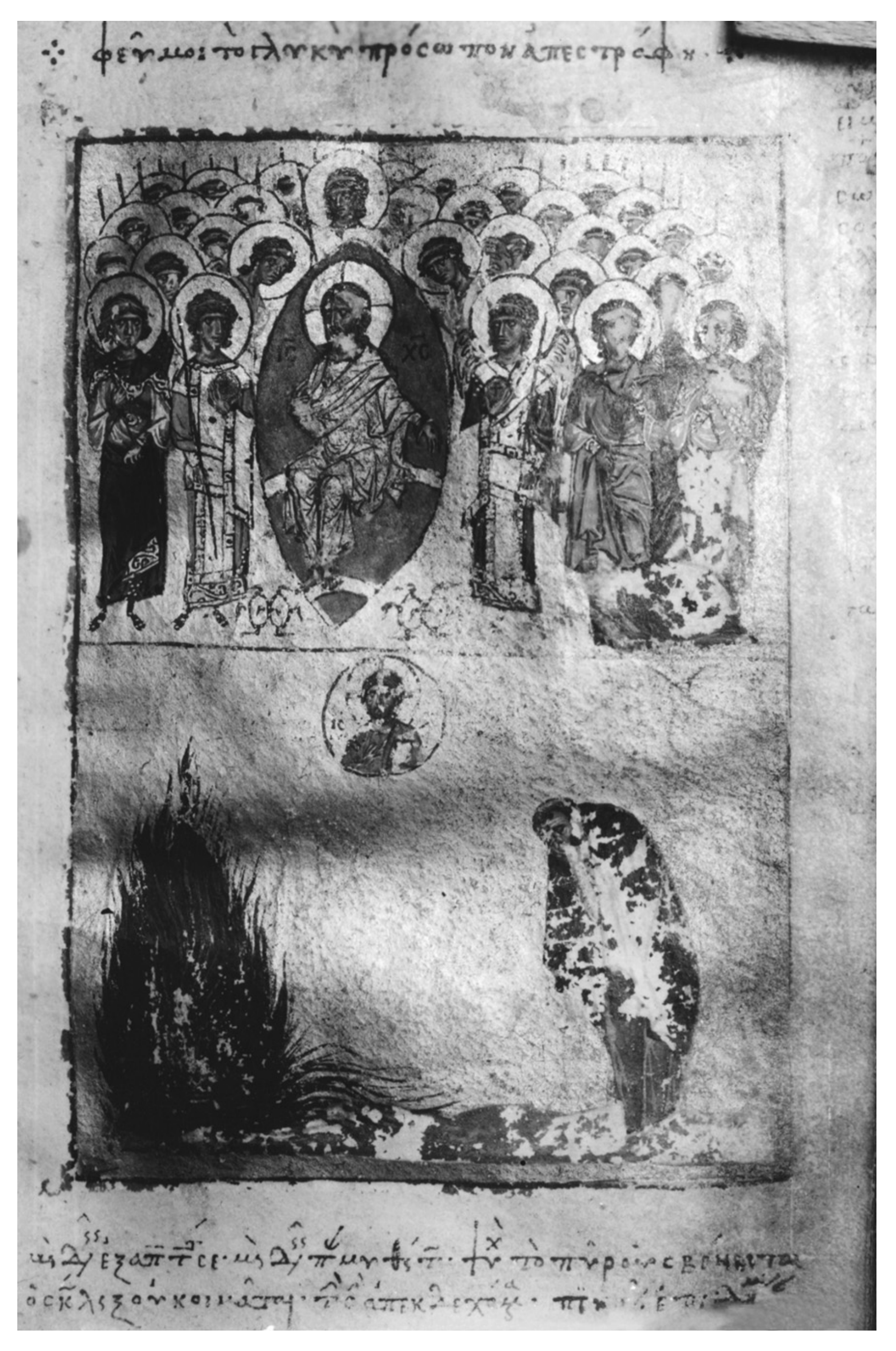


Figure 3.11: Monk Sabbas before Christ (upper); Monk Sabbas before fire (lower), psalter, Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos, ms. 65, fol. 11r, twelfth century.

"Go out, soul, and be judged according to your worth." In the lower register two angels lead the soul towards a set of scales. The angels lay paper scrolls upon one of the scales, while black demons place balls of paper on the other scale (Fig. 3.12).[14]

The detailed imagining of the events of the afterlife conceived in absolutely specific, personal terms that we see in these images is in stark contrast not only to the vast public spectacle of the Last Judgment, but also to scriptural references. Within the Bible, whenever judgment is spoken of, it is almost always in broad, sweeping, general terms, relating to the large mass of humanity. Exactly how one's own, individual, personal trajectory would unfold is never really specified. Yet this is precisely what the monk in the Dionysiou Psalter sets himself the task of investigating. He is not just imagining a general scene laid out before him, but placing himself within it, projecting the events in their specificity as they might appear to him, affect him, when he is actually there himself.

Our monk here, it is safe to assume, is not unique in this respect, especially amongst supplicants in our contact portraits. This proclivity to envision a direct, personal relationship to the events that are to come is in many ways the defining feature – the hallmark – of these supplicants. Every contact portrait in itself already demonstrates a person envisioning himself or herself as the central agent, the main actor in the drama, picturing a single, face-to-face encounter with divinity. The portrait is the projection of how that encounter will take place, what it will look like, how it will unfold.

The scenes of the Dionysiou Psalter exceed scripture in another way as well, one that is an instance of a further essential factor in the development of the afterlife in Byzantium. The image on fol. 11v showing the surrender of the soul means that the monk is meditating not only on the events surrounding final judgment, but is considering matters from the very moment of death onward. However, there is no scriptural basis for any such speculation. Indeed, Andrew of Crete, writing in the seventh century, specifically warns people that they cannot know what happens to the soul once it separates from the body.[15] Again, as was the case with the Last Judgment itself, it is the absence of detailed descriptions of such events that

[14] S. Pelekanides et al. (eds.), *The Treasures of Mount Athos: The Illuminated Manuscripts*, 4 vols. (Athens: Ekdotike Athenon, 1973–79), vol. I, 419–21. For a discussion of the contact portrait, see Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 49–51. For the scenes discussed below, see R. Stichel, *Studien zum Verhältnis von Text und Bild spät- und nachbyzantinischer Vergänglichkeitsdarstellungen* (Vienna: Böhlau, 1971), 70–75. See also the references to the manuscript in G. Parpulov, *Toward a History of Byzantine Psalters ca. 850–1350 AD* (Plovdiv: n.p., 2014).

[15] Andrew of Crete, *Oration 21, On Human Life and Death, PG* 97: 1289C.

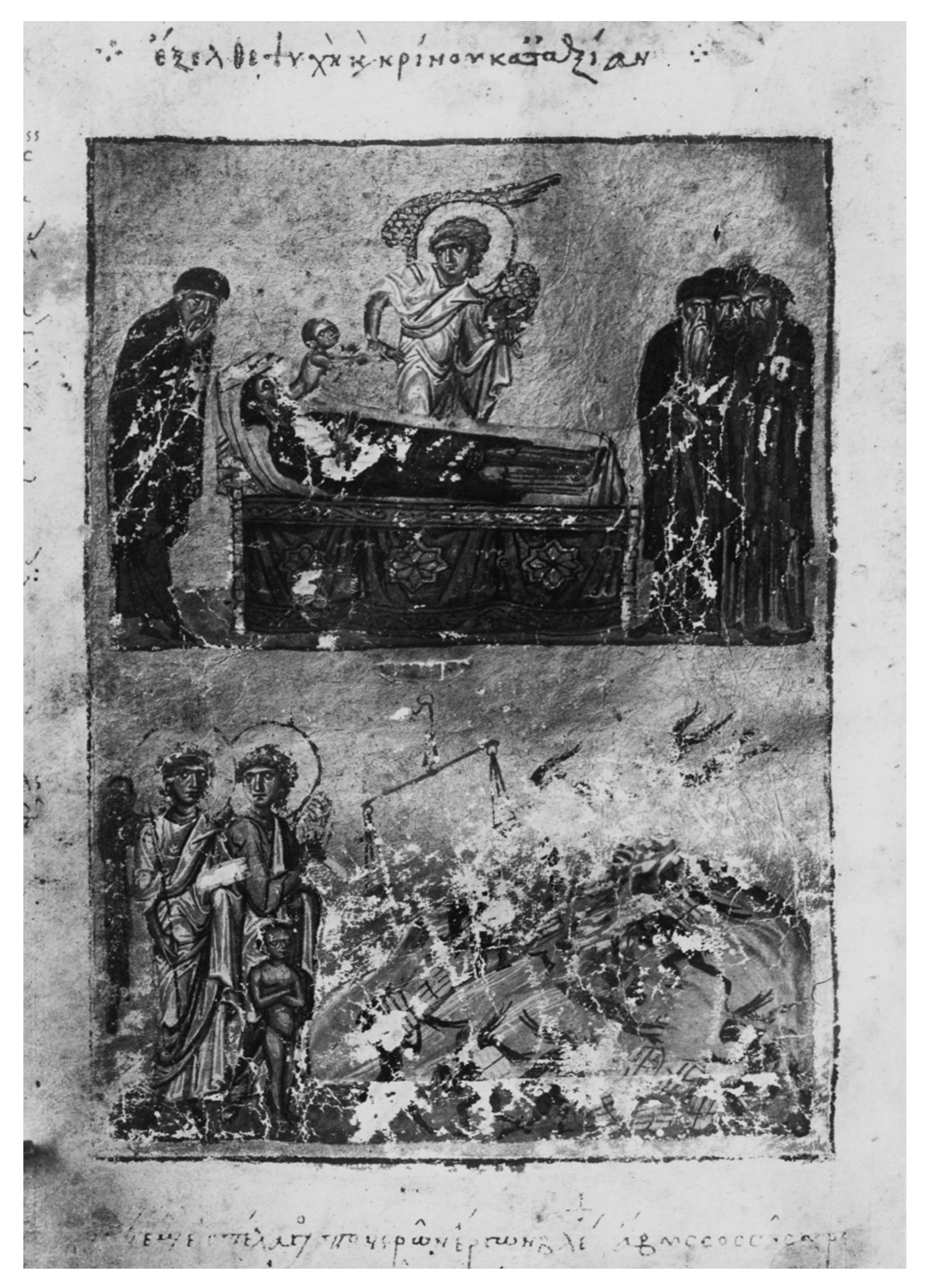


Figure 3.12: Death scene (upper); Judgment scene (lower), psalter, Dionysiou Monastery, Mount Athos, ms. 65, fol. 11v, twelfth century.

opens the door to the successive embroidering of narratives, resulting in the magnificent edifice of the afterlife.

To aid him or her in the task of envisioning the post-death journey, the supplicant would already have much to rely upon. Many scenes from the standard repertoire of Byzantine art are already a meditation upon the look and feel of death, and could provide visual cues for what was to come. By the tenth century at least, the representation of death and the extraction of the soul from the body was common, both for the Virgin Mary and monks.[16] And by the eleventh century, which is the time when the growth in numbers of contact portraits begins to pick up, the supplicant would have some familiarity with the nether regions of the afterlife. This would be not only via the Last Judgment, but also through Anastasis scenes in particular, which represent Christ after his crucifixion descending to the underworld to rescue Adam, Eve, and other Old Testament figures who had not had any previous opportunity for salvation (see Fig. 3.15).[17] Furthermore, every supplicant would certainly be more than familiar with the inhabitants of the afterlife: beautiful angels, of course, but also the demons and devils that proliferate, for example in illustrations of the Ladder of John Klimakos (see Fig. 3.19).[18]

These images, however, are not the only reserve from which a supplicant might draw inspiration. Another major area where the post-death realm is imagined and articulated is in visions. In these mystical experiences, individuals find themselves already in the midst of the journey into the afterlife. In time, they manage to return to this life, where they report on what they have seen, heard, and felt to their companions.[19] These reports, which often achieved extremely wide circulation and were constantly recopied and retold, could not but have been highly influential on supplicants, for

[16] For the Virgin Mary, see the tenth-century ivory plaque at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in Evans and Wixom (eds.), *The Glory of Byzantium*, 154–55. See also I. Kalavrezou, “Exchanging Embrace: The Body of Devotion,” in M. Vassilaki (ed.), *Images of the Mother of God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 103–15, especially 107–08. For related death scenes involving monks, see J. R. Martin, *The Illustration of the Heavenly Ladder of John Climacus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 28–29. See also V. Marinis, “‘He Who is at the Point of Death’: The Fate of the Soul in Byzantine Art and Liturgy,” *Gesta* 54 (2015): 59–84, for many related scenes that are illustrations of the *Kanon eis Psychorragounta* (Kanon for he who is at the Point of Death). See further L. Brubaker, “Byzantine Visions of the End,” in P. Clarke and T. Clayton (eds.), *The Church, the Afterlife, and the Fate of the Soul*, Studies in Church History 45 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 97–129.

[17] See Kartsonis, *Anastasis*. [18] Martin, *Heavenly Ladder*.

[19] For a detailed examination of the literary genre of visions and other “beneficial tales,” see J. Wortley, “Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell in Byzantine ‘Beneficial Tales’,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 53–69. For an extremely useful indexed listing of the large numbers of these tales that exist, see the website of the same author, entitled Repertoire of Byzantine “Beneficial Tales,” at http://home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~wortley/index.html.

a number of reasons. In the first place, they are narratives told from exactly the point of view that interests the supplicant most: they are the private, individual record of one person's experiences. Even more important, however, is the fact that these narratives are by far the most detailed descriptions of the sequence of events, the kinds of things that one would be likely to encounter on one's own journey. In respect of sheer quantity of material, they convey more than any other source, whether in text or images. As both the product of the hunger for more details concerning the afterlife that we have so far been tracking and a resource to be mined in one's own further elaboration of it, visions are an essential tool for understanding the thought world of the supplicant.

A glimpse of the world that visions open onto can already be seen in the soul-weighing scenes of the Dionysiou Psalter and the Kariye Camii Last Judgment. At the center of the Kariye image, a scale hangs from the empty throne, a naked soul standing beneath. Large angels approach from the left carrying scrolls, while to the right a small demon carrying a hooked stick pulls down on the scale on his side of the apparatus (Fig. 3.13).

Similarly, in the Dionysiou Psalter, demons approach with their crumpled balls of paper. In both these scenes, judgment is rendered not by Christ pronouncing his verdict; rather, one sees, so to speak, the wheels of justice turning, and not without chicanery. Demons are about, and wherever they reside trouble is sure to follow, for the one thing everybody knows about demons is that they do not play fair. The potential for mischief is everywhere. Within the visions proper, the atmosphere of dread and uncertainty caused by these characters and their cohorts expands even more, and the soul-travelers find themselves in a universe of ever-greater complexity and danger. We will return to this material shortly, but before we do, let us turn our attention to another area where specific features of the afterlife are considered in detail, which we will call, for want of a better term, official theology.

In sum, we may say that it is material of this sort that forms the life-world within which contact portraits move. This world is the cause of the supplicants' fear, as they are confronted with a possibly unpleasant future, but it is also, in itself, brought into its ever more developed state by that very fear. In the perpetual worrying about what this future will bring, the supplicant is precisely the spur to increasingly fevered accounts, searching them out, providing the fertile ear on which they will fall.

* * *

As much as scriptural references to the afterlife are sparse, it is also the case that Byzantine theology contains no subtle theoretical examination of the

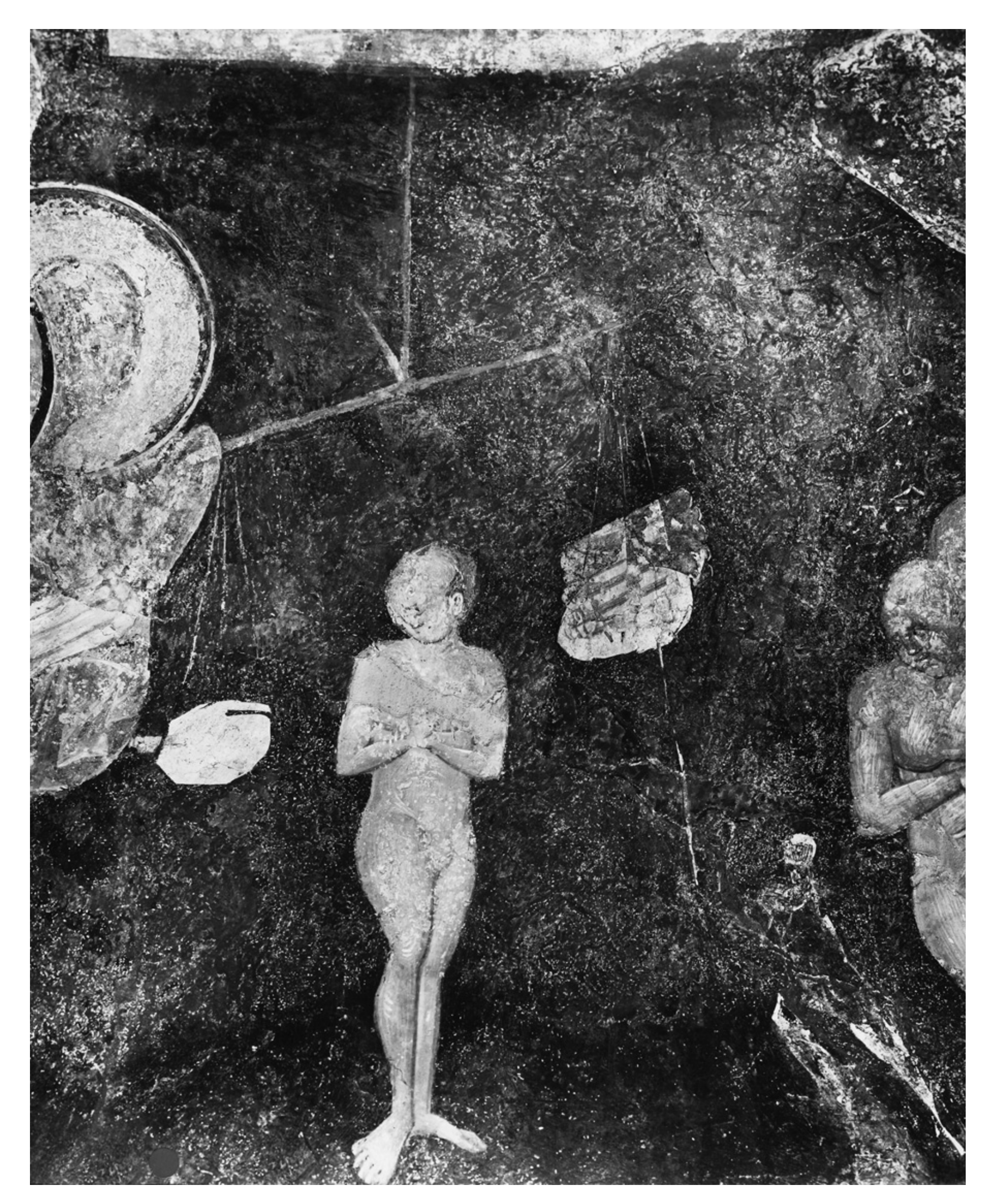


Figure 3.13: Soul-weighing scene, detail, Last Judgment, Kariye Camii, Istanbul, first quarter of the fourteenth century.

subject to compare with other areas of its endeavors – as, for example, Basil's work on the Holy Spirit or that of Nikephoros, Patriarch of Constantinople, on icons. Indeed, it is fair to say that until the thirteenth century, when a sudden (but then long-running) dispute on the topic

erupted with the Latin West, Byzantine theology proper showed remarkably little interest in the theme. This sets theology apart, too, from the flourishing endeavor of imagining the afterlife through various other means, of which we have just caught a glimpse in the preceding. The dispute with the West, however, forced the Byzantine Church to begin the task of compiling a doctrine on the subject. With this doctrine we are brought to our first encounter with some of the key, deep structural issues referred to earlier that the gift will be called on to navigate.

The disagreement that dragged Byzantine theology reluctantly into the afterlife had little to do with the staple of the field, the Last Judgment. Instead, it concerned an altogether more vague, shadowy topic that we have already broached, the fate of individual souls in the interim period following individual death, but prior to the Last Judgment. In the West, the belief had slowly developed over the centuries that during this period some individual souls spent time in the place that came to be known as Purgatory, and it was Purgatory itself that became a major bone of contention between the two Churches.[20]

Several accounts of this dispute have come down to us. Chief amongst them are the records of two separate conferences held in an attempt to resolve some of the many major conflicts between Byzantium and the Latin West, at which the disagreement over Purgatory figured prominently. The first took place at Lyons in 1274. The second began at Ferrara in 1438 and finished in Florence in 1439, as proceedings dragged on interminably.[21] From the fact that the argument was placed high on the agenda of two

[20] For the early history of Purgatory, see J. Le Goff, *The Birth of Purgatory*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). On the Byzantine response to Purgatory, see G. Dagron, "La perception d'une différence: les débuts de la querelle du purgatoire," in Association internationale des études byzantines, *Actes du XVe congrès international d'études byzantines, Athènes, 1976* (Athens: n.p., 1980), vol. IV, 84–92; R. Ombres, "Latins and Greeks in Debate over Purgatory, 1230–1439," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 35 (1984): 1–14; and M. dal Santo, "Philosophy, Hagiology and the Early Byzantine Origins of Purgatory," in P. Clarke and T. Clayton (eds.), *The Church, the Afterlife, and the Fate of the Soul*, Studies in Church History 45 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 41–51.

[21] On the Lyons conference, see J. Gill, "The Church Union of the Council of Lyons (1274) Portrayed in Greek Documents," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 40 (1974): 5–45. For the Ferrara–Florence conference, the acts of the discussion on Purgatory can be found in *Concile de Florence*. These consist of the arguments put forward by Mark, Metropolitan of Ephesos, and Bessarion, Metropolitan of Nicaea. The acts are also reported in some detail by A. d'Alès, "La question du purgatoire au Concile de Florence en 1438," *Gregorianum* 3 (1922): 9–50, and A. Michel and M. Jugie in cols. 1252–63 of the entry "Purgatoire," in *Dictionaire de Théologie Catholique*, vol. XIII–1 (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1936). See also D. Geanakoplos, "The Council of Florence (1438–39) and the Problem of Union between the Greek and Latin Churches," *Church History* 24 (1955): 324–46; and J. Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

conferences held 150 years apart, with all the major points of contention from the first conference still on the table at the second, it will be readily gauged that there were no easy solutions to the problem. Needless to say, the Ferrara–Florence council also provided no resolution, and the Purgatory issue remained divisive to the last, when the collapse of the Byzantine state brought discussions to an end.

The earliest account of the clash between East and West on the subject, however, predates the first of the conferences. It comes to us from Bardanes, Metropolitan of Corfu, and it proves to be one of the most revealing of the documents on the subject.[22] Undertaking a diplomatic mission to Italy in 1231 on behalf of Manuel Doukas, Despot of Epirus, Bardanes was staying at the Greek monastery of Casole on his way to a meeting with Frederik II and Gregory IX when he fell ill. During his enforced stay at the monastery he met several Franciscan monks, and it is from them that, apparently for the first time, a ranking member of the Orthodox Church encountered the idea of Purgatory. So distressed was Bardanes by what he heard that he penned his recollections of the event as a notification to his brethren of what he plainly regarded as a dangerous and erroneous new doctrine. His dismay upon hearing of the doctrine, it turns out, was prophetic of all future Byzantine responses to the idea.

Bardanes begins his report by telling how one of the Westerners, Bartholomew by name, set the debate in motion. He did this by asking a question relating to the Greek practice of the *epitimion*, a penance or penalty, often in the form of fasting, exclusion from the eucharist, or extra prayers, that was imposed on sinners before absolution for a sin could be granted.[23] The question he poses is the following: "Where do the souls of those go who have died without having performed penance and without having had the time to complete the *epitimia* that their spiritual fathers had prescribed?" And he then continues: "Because we believe that there exists . . . a 'purgatorial' fire, that is, a fire that purifies, and by this fire, those who pass from this world without repenting, like thieves, adulterers, murderers, and

[22] Bardanes's *Text on Purgatory* is in M. Roncaglia (ed. and trans.), *Georges Bardanès, métropolite de Corfou, et Barthélemy de l'Ordre Franciscain*, Studi e testi francescani 4 (Rome: n.p., 1953). For a related account, see Y. Papadogiannakis, "Michael Glykas and the Afterlife in Twelfth-Century Byzantium," in P. Clarke and T. Clayton (eds.), *The Church, the Afterlife, and the Fate of the Soul*, Studies in Church History 45 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2009), 130–42.

[23] On the practice of the *epitimion*, see G. Wagner, "Bussdisziplin in der Tradition des Ostens," *Liturgie et remission des péchés. Conférences Saint-Serge, XXe Semaine d'Études Liturgiques: Paris, 2–5 juillet 1973* (Rome: Edizioni liturgiche, 1975), 273–93. See also A. Papadakis, "Epitimion," in A. Kazhdan (ed.), *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), vol. I, 723–24. The topic is further discussed below, pp. 112–13.

all those who commit venal sins suffer in this fire for a certain amount of time and they are purified of the stains of their sins, and they are then released from punishment."[24]

Several arguments immediately spring to Bardanes's mind upon hearing this. In the first place, Purgatory contravenes what he, and all later Greek writers, take to be the fundamental principle of the Last Judgment, which is that no final deserts occur before the final day of reckoning. To begin torturing souls immediately after death as the concept of Purgatory envisions is to start the procedures reserved for the post-Last Judgment period long before their due time. "He who will judge the whole universe has not yet come with his glory to separate the just from the sinners." It is only after the Final Judgment that the wicked will be tormented, and the good blessed. Until then, Bardanes asserts, "the souls of the sinners . . . go to dark places that sketch in advance the tortures that they will have to undergo."[25] This idea of a "foretaste," or intimation (but nothing more than that) of what is to come becomes a commonplace of the Greek position. At the Council of Ferrara there was general agreement that all souls wait in the close vicinity of their respective final abodes. As phrased by Mark, Metropolitan of Ephesos, who along with Bessarion, Metropolitan of Nicaea was one of the chief Byzantine spokesman at the conference, the wicked rest on the precipice of Hell, in "darkness and the shadow of death . . . without light, and without any sight of life." and the blessed reside not far from Heaven, "close to God, with the angels." The key point, again, though, is that these souls have no direct experience of those places until after Final Judgment: the damned are "not yet given over to eternal tortures and fire."[26]

Furthermore, in contravening the principle of no deserts before Last Judgment, Purgatory leads to manifest injustice. Since it is only at the Day of Judgment that the actual determination of whether or not one is a sinner takes place, Purgatory effectively condemns souls to real physical torture before they have been properly judged. This is unjustifiable, according to Bardanes: "who would dare to claim that there exists a purifying fire . . . before the decision of the Judge?"[27]

Perhaps even more fundamental, however, is Bardanes's further objection to Purgatory: he simply does not see the need for it. For him, absolution does not require punishment by fire or any other means; all that is needed is remorse, repentance, and a pure heart. "He who repents and

[24] Bardanes, *Text on Purgatory*, 56, 15–17. [25] Bardanes, *Text on Purgatory*, 58, 19–23.

[26] Mark of Ephesos, in *Concile de Florence*, 5.3; Michel and Jugie, "Purgatoire," col. 1259.

[27] Bardanes, *Text on Purgatory*, 60–62, 48–50.

sheds tears receives in this world complete rehabilitation and deliverance."[28] Loosing of sin is granted by God at nothing more than the genuine display of sorrow for one's sins. The concept of sinners having to suffer or undergo punishment in order for absolution to take place is absolutely alien to him.

In defense of this position, he adopts a fascinating form of argument: he scans biblical texts and produces several examples from which he argues entirely on linguistic, philological evidence. Thus King David, immediately after confessing his sins and repenting before Nathan, hears from Nathan that the Lord has pardoned his sins. "'Has pardoned' in the past tense," Bardanes stresses, "not the future tense."[29] And again, he quotes the lines from 1 John 1:7 stating that "The blood of Christ purifies us of all sin." Not "will purify us," in the future tense, but in the present tense.[30] Remission occurs at the moment of repentance. There is no need for Purgatory.

The key objections that Bardanes gives voice to in his text were maintained intact by the Byzantines until the end. At the Ferrara conference again, we find the declaration "No purification of sin after leaving this life."[31] The Greeks are especially incensed at the idea of purification of souls by fire: "The doctors of our church have never mentioned in their works a purifying fire."[32] And they elaborate this into a counterargument: "The soul, freed from the body, has become completely incorporeal and immaterial . . . How can [such a] soul be punished by a corporeal fire?"[33]

In truth, however, despite these points of agreement, there were several other areas where matters were nowhere near as simple as Bardanes implies. This can be gauged even without entering into the details of the discussion themselves. Byzantine churchmen quarreled continuously amongst themselves, and at the start of the Ferrara conference, fully two hundred years after debate with the West was first joined, they were still not sure about where they stood on the key issues.[34] The emperor John VIII Paleologos, who was heading the Greek delegation, had to call a special meeting to canvass his members for their opinions the evening before discussions were slated to begin. What is more, they could not reach agreement immediately, but had to meet again on the following day.[35]

[28] Bardanes, *Text on Purgatory*, 68.

[29] Ἀφῆκεν, εἶπεν, ἐπί *παρ[ω]χημένου* χρόνου καί οὐκ ἐπί μέλλοντος: Bardanes, *Text on Purgatory*, 64.

[30] Οὐ καθαρίσει δέ λέγει ἐπί μέλλοντος χρόνου, ἀλλά καθαρίζει ἐπί χρόνου ἐνεστῶτος: Bardanes, *Text on Purgatory*, 64–66.

[31] Bessarion of Nicaea, in *Concile de Florence*, 3.19.6.

[32] Bessarion of Nicaea, in *Concile de Florence*, 3.2, and mentioned again in point 4.

[33] Bessarion of Nicaea, in *Concile de Florence*, 3.19.8.

[34] Ombres, "Latins and Greeks," 3–4.

[35] Gill, *Council of Florence*, 119–20.

And the position that they finally arrived at was, as we shall see, not without its problems.

That a similar confusion was already abroad in the Byzantine ranks much earlier is demonstrated by the sorry events of the Lyons conference. That meeting ended with the Byzantines signing an agreement that conceded fully to the existence of Purgatory; indeed, it surrendered to the Latin Church on every count. Yet the agreement was subsequently abrogated by the Byzantines in the face of intense opposition from the populace at all levels of society, who could not bring themselves to accept the principles of the doctrine.[36]

This story is emblematic of the uncertainties of the Byzantine position. In defense of those who signed the agreement in the first place, it should be noted that there were clearly considerations other than religious ones weighing upon the Byzantines. Michael VIII (r. 1259–82), was desperately attempting to avoid an imminent Western attack led by Charles of Anjou. He turned for help to the Pope, Gregory X, hoping that he would restrain Charles and prevent the assault. However, the Pope would only offer his protection to the Byzantine state if the Orthodox Church, in turn, would submit to Rome.[37] Under intense pressure, the Byzantine delegation signed the agreement. Yet the fact that a number of churchmen could even contemplate accepting Purgatory shows that Byzantine attitudes to the afterlife were then, as later, far from settled. On the other hand, however, the massive objection to the agreement in Byzantium proper also indicates the widespread strength of opposition to Purgatory, no matter what other benefits (including the very survival of the state) might accrue.[38]

We will enter into the details of what caused the Byzantines such difficulty shortly, but before we do, let us examine their system as they present it in argument against the Latins. At the Ferrara–Florence debate there was much discussion over a group of individuals called the *mesoi* – "the ones in the middle" – those who have died repentant for a sin but without having had time to perform their *epitimion*.[39] Two hundred years

[36] For more on the general response to the Union of Lyons agreement, see D. Nicol, "The Byzantine Reaction to the Second Council of Lyons, 1274," *Studies in Church History* 7 (1971): 113–46.

[37] G. Ostrogorsky, "The Palaeologi," in *The Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. IV, ed. J. Hussey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 334–40.

[38] H. Evert-Kappesova, "La société byzantine et L'Union de Lyon," *Byzantinoslavica* 10 (1949): 28–41.

[39] For more on those in the "middle" state, see N. Constas, "'To Sleep, Perchance to Dream': The Middle State of Souls in Patristic and Byzantine Literature," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 91–124.

earlier, however, Bardanes makes no mention of this group, for good reason. One of his arguments against Purgatory, it will be recalled, was based on the fact that it was not necessary, since God provides absolution at the first sign of genuine contrition. For Bardanes, then, there is no real problem concerning these people in the middle state and their lack of *epitimion*, for if one dies repentant, one's sins have already been forgiven. He thus spends no time discussing them: indeed, as a class they do not really exist for him.

By the time of Ferrara–Florence, however, the doctrine has obviously changed somewhat, and the fact that some people do indeed die without completing *epitimia* is regarded as a topic that must be addressed. Yet, significantly, the response has a familiar ring to it: at death, the need for *epitimia* is suspended, and absolution is granted. God will respond to the prayers of the living for the dead, and forgive the outstanding sins.[40] The fifteenth-century council participants and Bardanes thus share a common conception regarding the central role of God's forgiveness in sin absolution. All are opposed to the idea given such vivid form by Purgatory, that sins must be punished before they can be allowed to lapse. To them, God can and will forgive sins of his own accord. *Epitimia*, penalties, and punishment barely figure in these discussions.

This relentless insistence of the Byzantines on the fact that God would forgive outstanding sins, especially as death approaches, in turn placed the Latins under considerable pressure to account for why anything more than this forgiveness was required within their own system. At Ferrara an attempt was made by the Latins to mount a counterargument by means of the concept of divine justice. Sin as a transgression, the Latins maintained, consists of two separate components: the guilt of the sinner; and an offense against divine justice. The element of guilt could and would be forgiven by God, but the offense against divine justice entailed a debt that could only be acquitted by punishment, even if the guilt had already been forgiven. The debt to be paid to divine justice is an unwaivable, implacable necessity, unrelated to the guilt of the sinner.[41]

It is worth pausing here to consider the different conceptions of sin loosing manifested by each side, the one allowing for forgiveness, the other demanding punishment. The Latin idea of punishment for sin or wrongdoing, still with us today, is readily understandable, even without reference to divine justice in particular. Of ancient pedigree, it revolves around the

[40] Mark of Ephesos, in *Concile de Florence*, 5.12, 6.14. [41] *Concile de Florence*, 1.7, 4.6.

conception that a price must be paid for sin.[42] The sinner has somehow upset the balance of equilibrium in the universe by gaining a benefit that should not have been had, at the cost of injury to another – either a person, or a more abstractly construed entity such as divine justice, or society. In the words of Brunner, "A just order has become unstable."[43] Equilibrium and stability can only be restored – that is, the whole effect of the sin can only be obliterated – if the sinner pays at least an equal measure of discomfort for the benefit improperly obtained, and the injured party is recompensed.[44] It is this idea, that the sinner must endure some distress before the sin can be fully remitted, that is given such vivid form by Purgatory. If the sinner dies before this happens, that sin cannot be allowed to lapse painlessly. The primary principle of cost overrides the feature of death, and is instituted in the world of the beyond.

Purgatory thus becomes an important means for the articulation of a web of concerns for the Latins: a specific mode of release from sin by punishment, certainly, but more as well. Those who die without having paid the price for their sin, those in the middle state, form a category that straddles the borderline between the worlds of the living and the dead. They thus also clearly pose the question of the interrelation between those worlds, and of the principles of justice, which, because they must appear necessary and immutable, must be made to stretch unaltered across the great divide.

None of this, however, appears to apply to the Byzantines insofar as their professed statements indicate. Indeed, the question of those in the middle state seems to be entirely one of the Latins' own making, the problem being peculiar to their own conceptions of sin, justice, and the afterlife. As far as the afterlife is concerned, the Byzantine emphasis on forgiveness emanating directly from God, rather than as a result of punishment, means that the principle can operate as well in life as in death. Those in the middle state thus seem to embody no particular problem concerning the borderline of death. As Meyendorff states, death itself constitutes no fundamental break from life in the Byzantine mind, as the whole of spiritual existence takes place within the realm of the sacramental Church, which promises Everlasting Life.[45]

Furthermore, as is frequently pointed out by all modern commentators who write on the debates over Purgatory, Byzantine ideas relating to sin

[42] E. Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, trans. M. Hottinger (New York: Harper, 1945), 220–24.
[43] Brunner, *Justice and the Social Order*, 221.
[44] A. Ryan, *Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 9.
[45] J. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 222.

and justice are radically different from the Latin conception. Sin is not regarded as an illicit pleasure that must be paid for, but a falling from grace, a sort of disease that must be cured, not by punishment and suffering, but by education, love, and caring. Humanity must recover its blessed state by spiritual awareness.[46] "Divinization rather than satisfaction," says Roncaglia.[47] There is no need or space in this system for penalties and pain.

With its stress on love, repair, forgiveness, and healing, the Byzantine system is a far cry from the Latin framework. The idea of a debt to divine justice struck the Greeks as completely bizarre. Indeed, from the Byzantine vantage point, the Latin system could only be described as astonishingly harsh, severe, and legalistic, as it insists that an absolute requirement for a release from sin is payment in pain and suffering, under all circumstances, even beyond death. As Every says, "The Greeks could not understand that Latin purgatory was for those who died repentant." To them, this was "harsh retribution from penitent souls for repented sins."[48] It is this unbending Latin legalism, we might say, this insistence on universal, unforgiving principles of justice, that necessitated the creation of the category of the *mesoi* – "the ones in the middle."

If it is true, then, that the *mesoi* are essentially a Latin category, we may say as well that it is hardly surprising that the Byzantines were in something of a muddle regarding them. The Latins set the terms of the debate, and these are terms that correspond to a particular conceptual system. The answers sought by the Latins were ones that would fit into the spaces within that system. The Byzantine structure is rather different, and the Greeks were therefore constantly on the defensive, being forced into responding to questions and making statements that had no space or purchase in their own framework, and which therefore had an entirely different impact and meaning for them. No wonder, then, that their responses were vague and unsure. They had very little to ground them in.

We shall return to a further discussion of these issues in a moment, and indeed, we will have cause to reconsider some of the conclusions just reached, but first let us make a few observations concerning the Byzantine system as it stands. One of its features is that the only movement of souls ever envisaged is upward, toward the blessed realms. On the one hand, this means that the system is quite asymmetric. There is never any question of those in the middle state (and certainly not the blessed) moving downward toward the wicked. On the other hand, despite the statements proclaiming the

[46] See for example, Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 220. Also see G. Every, "Toll Gates on the Air Way," *Eastern Churches Review* 8, 2 (1976): 139–51, especially 140.

[47] In Bardanes, *Text on Purgatory*, 53.

[48] Every, "Toll Gates," 140.

efficacy of prayer and God's mercy, these seem to have a limited operational field, in that they do not apply fully to those who are conclusively evil. Fully evil souls seem to be well over the borderline, with no hope of reprieve at all. Divine mercy may alleviate their suffering a little, but it will not get them out of their category if they are wicked, and they remain in their realm of darkness.[49] In the case of the *mesoi*, however, there is no doubt that they will eventually join the saved.

This point applies just as well to the Latin theory, although there is a major difference that creeps in, and renders the two systems entirely dissimilar in retrospect. This concerns the method of movement of the souls. For the Latins, the true "middleness" of the state is brought out in the way they move. They are allowed to migrate to the upper levels only after having tasted of the lower. It is the admixture of the torture of Hell that provides the impetus for the move into Heaven. It is as though the soul goes to Hell for a short time. In this way, Latin "middle" souls are truly mediate, between the realms, tasting of both.

The Greeks, however, have no such neatness in their structure such that the transitions are explained entirely by reference to mediation mechanisms internal to the system. In the Greek formulation, the *mesoi* move upward due to external agencies: the prayers of the living and the mercy of God. They therefore have no flirt with Hell, even on a temporary basis, and suffer none of its punishments. Yet they ascend closer to God nonetheless. In a sense then, they are not "middles," poised between the worlds. The implication is that they are already blessed, if slightly less so than the blessed proper, whose ranks they will soon join. They have much less in common with the damned than their Latin equivalents. The basic dividing line between the wicked and the *mesoi* can be drawn much more firmly for the Greeks than it can for the Latins. In a sense then, for the Greeks, the fundamental division into saved and damned that will last up to and beyond the Last Judgment occurs already at each death.

Having sketched out the main lines of the debate, let us now turn to an in-depth analysis of the Byzantine position on Purgatory. We commented earlier that for the Latins, those in the middle state embody a problem relating to necessary principles of justice and their relation to the life/afterlife distinction. These principles did not appear to be of as much

[49] There are some few exceptions to this rule. One, for example, concerns the emperor Trajan, whose release from Hell was obtained by the intercession of the Virgin. Such stories are mentioned in the debates (Mark of Ephesos, in *Concile de Florence*, 5.12), but it is clear that they are very much extraordinary happenings. The best the damned can generally hope for is some slight mitigation of their plight.

concern to the Byzantines, who had a rather different set of beliefs on the subject. Yet although this is the impression that one obtains from the debates, it is not strictly true of Byzantine attitudes if one digs a little deeper into questions of sin and forgiveness.

The difficulties surface right at the outset of the Byzantine encounter with Purgatory. It is worth repeating here Bartholomew's initial question: "Where do the souls of those go who have died without having performed a penance and without having had the time to complete the *epitimia* that their spiritual fathers had prescribed?" Bardanes's answer, backed up by scriptural proof, is that absolution is forthcoming merely at the first sign of repentance. Yet, in fact, Bardanes has not answered the full implications of Bartholomew's questions. For Bartholomew is not simply interested in an isolated response as to what happens to Byzantine souls after death. Rather, he is concerned with the question of the *epitimion* as a general principle of loosing, and how it relates to death. Yet Bardanes does not address the question at all. His answer that God forgives all simply at repentance skates over the whole issue of *epitimia*; indeed, after its occurrence in Bartholomew's question, the word never appears again in Bardanes's text. Bardanes never even acknowledges that a penalty exists as a requirement for forgiveness under normal circumstances, let alone one where death is imminent. And he does not seem to notice that he has committed himself to a contradiction, no doubt sensed by Bartholomew, which is that if absolution is but instantly dependent on remorse, then no *epitimia* should ever really be required at all. Bardanes may have proved that God's forgiveness is instantaneous and that no punishment of the sinner is required, but in the process he has also proved that the practice of the *epitimion* itself is superfluous.

At Ferrara, as well, we find much the same phenomenon. The question of *epitimia* and the problems that it raises are sidestepped again; not quite so blithely this time, yet the central issues that it brings to the fore in relation to absolution are never fully confronted. In all the many pages that we have on the debate, the issue is raised only once, by Mark of Ephesos. Responding to the very question we have just broached about the necessity for the *epitimion*, he gives various reasons for it, underlying most of which is the idea that some pain is necessary to counter and cast out the effects of sin. Yet having said all this, he follows it up immediately with the declaration that at death, *epitimia* are no longer required. The dying person is absolved, and God will forgive all outstanding sins, "supplying paradise itself."[50] No explanation is given.

[50] Mark of Ephesos, in *Concile de Florence*, 6.14.

Yet no less than Bardanes, the Greeks at the council are involved in a contradiction (again pointed out by the Latins), that if God can forgive sins painlessly after death, why need one bother with the discomfort of a penance before? Why are sins not forgiven in the same painless manner before death as well? The Greeks never confront these issues, and never relate their two systems of pre- and post-death loosing to each other. They never discuss fully the function of the penalty, and why, as the principle of sin forgiveness in life, it should be superseded at death by something else. The result, of course, is that the whole theory looks ad hoc, and, worst of all, contradictory. Different principles that defeat each other are invoked without any justification.

The Byzantine position in general, then, appears to be tenuous in several respects. The assertion that repentance and not punishment is all that is necessary for forgiveness is contradicted by *epitimia*. Further, the idea that death does not pose any problems or constitute an important conceptual limit for the Byzantines would appear to be false as well, for the method of sin loosing alters as soon as that limit is reached. Our earlier suggestion, then, that the issues concerning the *mesoi* and the afterlife were germane only to the Latin worldview but not the Byzantine is not wholly accurate either. It would be more correct to say that those issues are in fact fully relevant to the Byzantines but never confronted, and certainly not resolved.

Significantly, it is not just the Byzantines themselves who practice such avoidance. Modern scholarship, too, is faithful to its sources in this respect. Meyendorff and Roncaglia, as we have seen, talk only of love, divine forebearance, and spiritual healing in relation to sin. Gill writes: "The Greek church imposes a penance at confession . . . but not in connection with any temporal punishment."[51] And Every states: "The Greeks were accustomed to give penances, but not as penalties, and not on deathbeds."[52] To the question of what an *epitimion* is, if not a penalty, and why it should it be dropped at death, Every offers as little response as his sources.

This situation, then, is somewhat surprising, and raises some difficult questions concerning the nature of the Byzantine belief. At first sight it would appear that we are in a privileged position regarding the nuances of their attitudes to the afterlife. We have detailed first-hand statements reporting just what those beliefs are. Yet clearly, something is amiss in that those overt statements do not match up with a key feature of the Orthodox religion, one common in everyday conduct.

[51] Gill, *Council of Florence*, 124. [52] Every, "Toll Gates," 140.

Although none of the modern scholars who write on the debate confront the issue of these contradictions directly, many describe the Byzantines as being primarily concerned with issues of spirituality rather than the intricacies of logical argument; these latter are considered rather to be the province of the Latins with all their legalistic concerns. The general impression one obtains is that the vagueness and contradictions of the Byzantine position were due to the fact that the Greeks were not rigorous thinkers and logicians. Yet this is to underestimate Byzantine capabilities in several crucial respects. Let us press ahead, then, with the presumption not that the Byzantines were mystics living in a fool's paradise ungoverned by rationality, but that there are underlying principles at work that caused them to behave as they did.

The problem of the Byzantine position, it so happens, is exactly the one discussed by Bourdieu in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, where he examines the question of contradictions within society, specifically those that occur between theory and practice. In this case, it is clear that the Byzantine beliefs as articulated in the debates constitute an overt theory, here a theory dealing with absolution. The *epitimion*, on the other hand, is very much a practice, a habit, a custom. The crucial feature here, however, is that, as Bourdieu demonstrates is the case with all practices, it is not simply a neutral activity, signifying nothing. Practices encode specific sets of principles and convictions, many of them not otherwise explicitly articulated. These principles and convictions are as much a part of the overall structure of a cultural belief-system as conscious beliefs themselves. The practice of *epitimia* deals with exactly the same issue of absolution as official theory, yet it declares implicitly (because it is "only" a practice, not an articulated theory) the exact opposite of that theory: that a penalty is indeed required for loosing of sins to take place. Moreover, as a custom frequently enacted by everyone within the Orthodox Church, it would be no less prominent and influential, and play no less integral a role within the total belief structure than overtly formulated principles, or consciously held convictions.

In what follows, then, we will examine these contradictory beliefs from the perspective provided by Bourdieu. As we will see, the fact that each is borne within two alternative cognitive modes – one theory, the other practice – is highly significant, since each of those modes has different properties and effects. Let us begin with a closer look at the way the key notions of sin, punishment, and absolution interact with each other.

For the supplicants with whom we are concerned, as the Byzantine theologians themselves remark, the most powerful deterrent effect in

relation to sin is the Last Judgment.[53] Despite the fact that the loosing of sin appears to be about the lifting of the threat of that judgment, loosing is, almost paradoxically, the key element in maintaining the effectiveness of its deterrent effect. If loosing did not exist, and a sin had been committed, there would then be nothing to deter that person from future sin, because he or she would already be condemned to future suffering. Loosing thus allows the idea of the afterlife to retain its proscriptive force in all circumstances.

Yet, within this system, if it is to be effective, the mechanism by which the sin is loosed itself needs to have some form of deterrent effect. If not, as the Latins point out, and if sin, once incurred, were simply allowed to lapse at no cost to the sinner, then, again, there is nothing in place to prevent future sin. It will be clear that for both West and East, although more exaggeratedly so in the West, deterrence is a key factor in the regulation of sin, and it is certainly true that punishment is present in Byzantium, both in terms of the penalty of the *epitimion* and in the core, fundamental belief in the Last Judgment.

These conceptions bring us close to an explanation for the somewhat strange Byzantine attitude to penalties, which sees them as being necessary before death, but absolutely absurd after. The idea of penalty education is rooted in a practical, social formation, the aim of which is to modify behavior, and prevent people from falling into sin. But this, of course, only makes sense in relation to the time-span of life itself – that is, before death. Accordingly, penalties are imposed during life, where they have their specific role to play. After death, however, the question becomes irrelevant; the issue is not how to teach one to behave after death, for then the situation has changed entirely. The same possibilities of right or wrong behavior no longer exist. In fact, the concept of sin as applicable to one's behavior after one has exited this life and entered the next is meaningless.

Given the above, then, it makes perfect sense that the Greeks should object to the idea of penalties after death. The notion of suffering when the very purpose of that suffering (to help ensure correct forms of behavior in the future) was no longer relevant may well have struck them as gratuitous. The sin can simply be forgiven, since punishment no longer has any purpose.

Eminently sensible, even humane, though this may be from the point of not imposing suffering when it is no longer required, it leaves the system

[53] For more on this, see below, note 83.

with a problem. As we have just seen, from the point of view of deterrence, if sin will be forgiven unilaterally at death, the mechanism entirely loses its effect, for no price will ever be paid by the offender. Because the sin has been loosed, the sinner will not face final judgment. But equally, as the loosing itself will be painless, there is no reason to avoid future sin. Indeed, as the Latins point out, the whole process of loosing sin by means of *epitimia* becomes absurd if all will be forgiven at death.

Thus when their battle with the Latins forced the Byzantines to produce an account of their beliefs concerning sin and loosing, they were faced with a major problem. It is clear that it is impossible to make their argument for punishment before death but not after because of the internal contradiction. And this, I think, explains the Byzantine silence on the issue, why they have little to say on the *epitimion* as a penalty, and do not account for why it should be dropped at death and replaced by forgiveness. To do so would be to acknowledge the contradiction, and that would render continued adherence to it as a belief-system impossible.

Furthermore, because the system as it exists in practice is untenable explicitly, when under the press of needs of coherent argument a theory falls due, the Byzantines took a radical step. Not only did they refuse to explain why *epitimia* should be enforced before, then dropped at, death, but in general they resorted to the extreme measure of banning the notions of punishment and suffering as necessary for absolution from their theory all together. Instead, they selected the principle of forgiveness through and through, thus freeing themselves of the contradiction of both, impossible to hold explicitly, simultaneously.[54]

The Latins, however, in their theory construction, took exactly the opposite measure, one that appears to be less extreme. Instead of proclaiming that absolution is on the part of God only, they reinstated the full principle of suffering as loosing, and the only loosing possible under all circumstances. This means that, even after death, absolution can still only be achieved by suffering, and it is here that we find the development and growth of Purgatory. There is no break in systems of absolution at death.

Yet, by what justification can penalties and suffering be imposed across the grave? Certainly not on the grounds of behavior modification, as we have seen. Instead, something further is required, and that is to hand in the form of the concept of the debt to divine justice. Only if punishment as loosing is elevated beyond a practical, purposive, pragmatic device, into

[54] See Bourdieu, *Outline*, for more on this mode of dealing with the contradictions between theory and practice.

a general abstract principle, the principle that justice requires a restoration of equilibrium by imposing a cost on the sinner, can it be logically enforced in the afterlife. It is thus applied totally as a voracious, abstract necessity, seemingly having nothing to do with a pragmatic attempt to govern behavior or function educationally.

A point that should be stressed here is the clear importance to the Byzantines of constructing a coherent argument. Despite the appearance of a muddle, and despite the general conception of the Greeks as being not particularly concerned with rational argument (or, in the eyes of modern apologists, being totally immersed in mystic intangibles of a higher order), there is deep concern with consistency and coherence. It is precisely because of this concern that they take the extreme steps that they do, even to the point of turning their backs on their own basic practice. Rather than having a compromised theoretical system, ineffectual and impossible to defend, they write out the contradiction.

This is not to claim, however, that the Byzantines were speciously, deliberately attempting to deceive the opposition. As Bourdieu makes clear, in cases such as this the purging of the argument was done more for themselves than for any others. The "truth" of the *epitimion*, that it was a penalty and as such was necessary for loosing, needed to be disguised from the agents themselves, because to hold it explicitly would be contradictory. This is precisely the notion of "social misrecognition" as elaborated by Bourdieu; that which everyone in a society "knows," but no one admits to.[55]

Yet Bourdieu further argues that if one side of the contradiction is suppressed from conscious knowledge, this is not simply for the sake of avoiding contradiction itself. Rather, it is to prevent the suppressed side of the argument from undermining another, additional theory that the society holds dear, and with which the initial position is in conflict. In this case, that second belief structure relates to the ideas given voice in the debates concerning the way in which sins are forgiven, and it proves to be of such importance that it forces the radical step of the Byzantine denial of their own practice. This theoretical position, too, will be of major importance for us in our analysis of contact portraits.

We approach here the very core of Byzantine theory, not only in its relation to *epitimia*, but in its struggle against Latin theory as well. The separate developments codified in Byzantine and Latin theory can be

[55] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 50–52 and 132–39. We shall encounter the idea of social misrecognition again later in our consideration of gift exchange in the fourth chapter.

seen to be caused by the fact that at the center of the loosing issue there is a clash of two fundamental principles. The two major methods for absolution involved in the debate seen so far are divine forgiveness (espoused by Byzantine theory) and penalty loosing (found in both Latin theory and practice, but encoded in Byzantine practice as well). The problem, however, is that these are not simply two differing methods of achieving the same end. Rather, they are in diametric opposition to each other.

In the Byzantine theoretical system, it is God's unilateral forgiveness of the many contraventions, despoilations, and defilements that is so important, and comes to be seen as one of his defining features. He does this out of magnanimity, grace, love, and sheer generosity. By contrast, the penalty-loosing system found in Latin theory may be described as an absolution *mechanism*. If one submits to a penalty, then one's sins are rescinded "automatically," by the action of the mechanism itself. In this process, however, there is little space left for the volition of God; God, in fact, seems to have little to do with the matter. The more a mechanism is involved, the less charity and mercy is required of him. Indeed, the selling of indulgences, the ultimate mechanistic device for absolution, may be seen to be the extreme but logical outcome of the Western practice.[56] Within the Byzantine theoretical system, however, there is virtually no process or mechanism to speak of regarding forgiveness. It is all entirely in the hands of God, and sinners are completely at his mercy. Forgiveness flows from generosity and love, not because a mechanism reestablishing balance has been set in motion.

Thus the benefit to the Byzantines from their theory, in opposition to both their own practice and the theory of the Latins, is a nexus of ideas concerning an all-powerful, but also all-forgiving, ultimately generous God. This God embodies the true meaning of Christian charity, ready to forgive without being "recompensated." And this clearly clashes with the idea of punishment absolution. The concept of a necessary punishment is therefore suppressed by the Byzantines, even though that punishment occurs in practice, in favor of a theoretical gain in the conception of God. It is for this reason as well that there is barely any acknowledgment of the existence of the *epitimion*, and never any explicit account of why it is enforced at some times and not at others. To admit what is entailed by it would be to contradict the fundamental principles in the Greek conception of the divine, and that would be unacceptable. The Byzantines therefore ignore it, and hold only to their theory.

[56] On indulgences, see the classic work by N. Paulus, *Indulgences as a Social Factor in the Middle Ages*, trans. J. Elliot Ross (New York: Devin-Adair, 1922).

The Byzantine–Latin split, then, was not only about Latin legalism versus Byzantine mysticism, as is usually suggested, or merely about different systems of forgiveness.[57] Rather, the dispute may be said to be about the power and volition of the divine. The Latins, developing an ever more rigorous and consistent theory, evolved a system that ended up functioning of itself, and cut out aspects of true forgiveness and charity of God; given that the process is performed properly, forgiveness must result from it. To the Byzantines, however, this may well have appeared to be an infringement or usurpation of divine mercy and divine power.

Yet, if the Byzantines have gained from their theory a conception of the divine as being fully compassionate and having total power over the crucial aspect of whether souls will be forgiven their sins, they have also lost compatibility with their own practice. The Latins on the other hand gain full coherence with their practice, and even provide a principled foundation for it in theory (a debt to divine justice). But they too have suffered a loss for their accruals, even though it is much more subtle and less obvious than the Byzantines, and that is that their conception of God is somewhat curtailed. His love and forgiveness are not quite so manifest as for the Greeks. In comparison to the Byzantine trade-off, this has proved to be historically much less noticeable, so that the Latins appear to be the winning side. But it is unmistakably there, and the Latins were aware of it. Their feeble defense of the idea of the debt to divine justice takes the form of an intricate piece of theological hair-splitting, plainly designed to rescue some power, charity, and authority for their God. It will be recalled that the Latin position stated that guilt upon the soul would be forgiven by God's charity, but that this was not of itself sufficient. Something more remains, and that is a separate debt to divine justice that can only be discharged by suffering. But as the Greeks argue, "When kings forgive an offence, do we see them adding a punishment as well?"[58] The whole matter is written off by that act of forgiveness. Nothing more remains. The Greeks must indeed have scoffed at this paltry god, whose divine justice was not even a part of himself, and who, further, had no control over it at all.

There remains one final point to be settled in relation to Byzantine theory. Given the obvious importance attached to the full power and mercy of the divine, why did the Byzantines bother with the whole process of maintaining, yet disguising, the system of *epitimia*? Why not simply drop it all together? The answer again is provided by Bourdieu. Just

[57] See for example Bardanes, *Text on Purgatory*, 48, and Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 220–21.
[58] Mark of Ephesos, in *Concile de Florence*, 5.19.

because the Byzantines have given up on punishment loosing theoretically does not mean that it is not a viable and valid idea functioning within the religion. As we have seen, there are more ways of holding a belief than doing so consciously.[59] It is possible to renounce the idea of suffering for absolution because, not being explicit, it simply "goes underground" in the form of the practice of *epitimia*. There it takes up a position as a belief-system not explicitly held, but encoded in practice, where it coexists with other similar principles of which agents are at best only dimly aware, but which nevertheless exert their force. Reinforced by other punishment practice in society, and in other areas of religious life (we will be examining this shortly), the *epitimion* can fulfill its function of marking out sin and inflicting a penalty for it, performing an educational task, and, most importantly, saving the structure of effective deterrence constituted by the Last Judgment. The *epitimion* is preserved because it serves precisely the aim of deterrence, and embodies and maintains a belief that is functional and educational. But it needs to remain underground, barely acknowledged, because it contradicts the theory of the magnanimity of God, to which the society is most deeply attached. Practice, effectively, allows a society to have its cake and eat it, to hold two contradictory principles simultaneously, but also to keep them apart in separate, different conceptual blocs that are never allowed to interrelate, so that no contradiction appears to the agents themselves.[60]

The implications of this for the methodology of attempting to understand a complex cultural system such as this one are clear. The current case confirms again a point made by both Dan Sperber and Bourdieu, that first-hand reports and explanations of beliefs cannot simply be taken at face value and accepted as full accounts of a particular mentality. For often those very reports, or the reasons by which people explain to themselves their own behavior, are necessary agents in the very act of disguise or social misrecognition.[61] The story is not told until all facets, even those that do not square with official

[59] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 109–24, 159–71.

[60] The phenomenon of contradictory features within Byzantine culture and society has also recently been considered by Kaldellis in *The Byzantine Republic*. Examining the nature of imperial power, he finds a contradiction between a "top down" theocratic belief which sees the emperor as elected by God and a "bottom up" secular, republican belief which holds that only the people are the legitimate source of that power. Kaldellis does not make use of the notion of misrecognition, but he likewise points out that each belief is mobilized within a different context, where it plays a specific role and serves a specific purpose. See especially pp. 169–84.

[61] On the unreliability of agents' understanding as to what their own behavior means, see D. Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 48, who makes the following point: "Exegesis . . . does not constitute the interpretation of the symbol,

telling, have been set into precisely the interrelationship that they themselves often seek to deny.

* * *

The foregoing discussion serves to introduce us to the general field of play within which the supplicant in our contact portraits is caught up and the gift is operative. From this we may distill several of the central themes that will be of major importance in our later discussion of the gift. The first of these is the distinctive – and conflicting – aspect of Byzantine beliefs concerning the afterlife: one the harsh, punitive, deterrent conception; the other a more benign view. Every other discourse concerning the afterlife that we will examine will likewise rotate about either one or the other (or, indeed, both) of these poles. If earlier we referred to the large-scale field of operations or game with which the portraits are involved, with these two conflicting claims we have now arrived at the constituent elements of that game. The term "game" here is warranted, because, as will become evident, the entirety of the Byzantine afterlife may be seen as a competition between these two positions.

The second major theme relates to the set of operating rules or sanctioned moves within the game that we mentioned earlier. These we may now associate with specific techniques relating to sin loosing – *epitimia* and forgiveness amongst them (we will soon discover more) – each connected with one or other of the opposing claims. Together, these two aspects of the gift – its relation to the two alternatives of the harsh or benign nature of the afterlife, and its exact technical mode of operation – constitute a major part of its meaning. Accordingly, the rest of the chapter will be dedicated to exploring these concepts in relation to those other areas touched on above where the afterlife is imagined. This will enable us to deepen our grasp of the structural features that determine the gift, and in relation to which it operates. Essential, too, in arriving at the meaning of the gift will be an understanding of the role that it plays in relation to mechanisms of misrecognition as it navigates the field. This aspect of misrecognition thus forms our third major theme of investigation.

As a preliminary to our later discussion, however, we may make a brief inquiry into how the gift relates to the discussion so far. It will be recalled that at the beginning of this chapter we declared that gifts are operative within this field, yet not of it. We get an early indication of this already in that, most strikingly, from the point of view of the theory just seen, such

but one of its extensions, and must itself be symbolically interpreted." See also Bourdieu, *Outline*, 38–43.

gifts should, strictly speaking, not be necessary. If all sins will be forgiven at death, then gifts should not be required. In this respect, gifts would appear to be like *epitimia*, which, likewise, should not be required by theory.

Given this, we might be tempted to suppose that gifts should be aligned with *epitimia* on the punitive side of the spectrum. As with everything related to the gift, however, the answer to this is complex, and a full answer must await our investigation of the remaining discourses of the afterlife.

* * *

We return first to fol. 11v of the Dionysiou Psalter 65 discussed earlier: a double image, which shows the surrender of the monk's soul in the upper register, and its march toward a set of scales in the lower (see Fig. 3.12). Considered in the light of the material we have just been examining, these are striking images indeed. For although the lower scene shows a judgment, it is certainly not the Last Judgment. In contrast to the repeated declarations of Byzantine theory, the sequence of the images makes clear that judgment of the soul immediately follows its departure from the body. This is confirmed by the inscription accompanying the upper image, which states "Get out, soul, and be judged according to your worth."

Furthermore, Dionysiou 65 is not alone in this respect; the whole tradition of visions mentioned earlier is devoted almost exclusively to the adventures of the soul immediately after death, and the many trials and judgments that it faces there. Let us now examine two of the most widely circulated of these visions, to see what they reveal further of the Byzantine view of the afterlife. Although they might initially be regarded as a relatively neutral recounting of post-death events, when viewed through the prism of the competing components of the Byzantine afterlife just described, they take on an altogether different significance. Inherently complex themselves, they are worth examining in detail rather than in summation since, as we will see, it is precisely in their detail (perhaps even more than in their general narrative content) that they have their most profound effect. A grasp of their multiple facets will be essential for our final estimation of the conceptual universe within which the lay figures in our contact portraits come to be constituted as supplicants, and within which the gift takes on its meaning.

The texts we will discuss here are the Vision of Kosmas the Monk,[62] and the vision of Gregory from *The Life of Basil the*

[62] The text is published and translated in "La version longue de la vision du moine Cosmas," ed. and trans. C. Angelidi, *Analecta Bollandiana* 101 (1983): 73–99. It is also summarized and

Younger.[63] In the first of these visions, which took place in 933, the monk Kosmas, who had been a chamberlain of the emperor Alexander (r. 912–13), fell ill some time after retiring to a monastery. One day, some five months into the illness, as he seems to his brethren to have fallen into a trance, he suddenly finds himself surrounded by a crowd of hideous demons. They drag him to a frightening cliff, and propel him along a narrow path on the side of a precipice, below which rages a boiling river. At the end of the path stands a giant demon of astonishing ugliness. He is black, with bloodshot eyes, and his tongue is hanging out. His right hand is terribly deformed, his left inflated like a column, and he catches sinners, and hurls them into the void. Seeing Kosmas, he shouts, "You are my friend." But as he reaches out to grab the monk, two old men appear, the apostles Andrew and John, and the fearsome devil hides.

The apostles lead Kosmas through the gates of a wall, to a beautiful village, full of grace and peace, where he sees Abraham, accompanied by many people he recognizes who have already died. He then proceeds to a magnificent city, empty of people, but decorated spectacularly with gold and precious stones, and is taken into a marvelous palace. There he waits for some time, but is eventually told by some eunuch attendants that he must be returned to life, and another monk, Athanasios from the Monastery of Trajan, brought in his place.

He is led back by the apostles via a different route, and on the way passes several lakes filled with all sorts of punishments and tortures, including fire, vermin, and a foul-smelling, dense fog. Eventually he is restored to life, and upon recovering from his vision he discovers that at the moment of his regaining consciousness, the monk Athanasios of the Monastery of Trajan has died.

In the *Life of Basil*, a text of the late tenth or early eleventh century, the picture is slightly different. Gregory, a disciple of Basil, learns that his friend Theodora, also a disciple of Basil's, has died. Gregory is curious to know more about her death, and asks Basil, but receives very little

discussed by C. Mango, *Byzantium: The Empire of New Rome* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1988), 151–53.

[63] For a critical edition and translation of the text, see *The Life of Basil the Younger*, ed. and trans. D. Sullivan, A.-M. Talbot, and S. McGrath (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 2014), 190–277. Every, in "Toll Gates," resumes and discusses the vision in some detail. E. Patlagean also examines this vision, and several others, in "Byzance et son autre monde: observations sur quelques récits," in *Faire croire: modalités de la diffusion et de la réception des messages religieux du XIIe au XVe siècle*. Table-ronde, Rome, 22–23 juin 1979, organisée par l'École française de Rome (Rome: École française de Rome, 1981), 201–21.

information. Then, one night, Gregory is woken from sleep by a young man, and after some missteps eventually finds himself at a magnificent house, where he meets up with Theodora. She proceeds to recount to him her story, beginning with herself on her deathbed. There she is surrounded by demons who proclaim her sins loudly, whilst two angelic protectors counter with her good deeds. An angel then describes very clearly to Theodora the process and theory of what she is to go through. From the moment of baptism, a good and evil angel each note down every good and every bad deed of each person. After death, one sets off on a path leading to Heaven, but along the way are positioned toll-gates. At each toll-gate an examination of a particular category of sin is made, and the guardians of each gate lie waiting in order to drive the soul off "into the abyss of fire, and the depth of Hades." If not enough good deeds are found to balance the sin, then these guardians will take the soul, "drag it out of life, and hit and bind it up, and . . . put [it] into the abyss of Hades . . . until the fearful and inexorable judgment."[64] Before setting off on the road, however, Basil (Theodora's spiritual father), already dead, appears, and gives the angels a purse with gold coins in order to help Theodora at the toll-gates. Basil, it would seem, has these coins as surplus himself. He has enough good deeds to spare.

And so Theodora proceeds, passing by each gate, confronted by a particular sin of her past. These range from anger, lies, avarice, and gluttony to idolatry, adultery, and murder.[65] As Every notes, it appears that sins already expiated and confessed do not seem to count for much. It is the forgotten or not-realized sins that are dangerous.[66] Indeed, at one gate Theodora has not enough to counterbalance the scales herself, and her guardians come to her rescue by paying for her from the gift of Basil. She thus avoids being dragged off and imprisoned. Finally she arrives at a beautiful, saintly garden, where all is peace and quiet.

These visions are fascinating for several different reasons. In the first place, they are the fullest elaboration of the individual, personal projection of the events of the afterlife that we referred to earlier, and hence also the most complex. One cannot fail to be struck by the intricate organization of the afterlife, with its cast of individualized characters, and its own economy in which everybody knows the rules. They demonstrate to the fullest extent the crowded, clamorous mental universe that the supplicants in our contact images inhabit as they commission their works.

[64] *The Life of Basil* 2:11. See also Every, "Toll Gates," 146.

[65] *The Life of Basil* 2:12–40. See also Mango, *Byzantium*, 164.

[66] Every, "Toll Gates," 147.

Further, the picture of that universe that they paint is radically different to the official proclamations of theory. On the key points of when judgment occurs, Gregory's vision of Theodora asserts that this happens immediately upon death. The toll-gates function as individualized judgment stations: at each gate, a decision is made in relation to a particular sin, and if one fails, one is, effectively, judged guilty of that sin, and condemned. As Wortley notes, this immediate judgment following death is a common feature of many of the stories of this sort.[67]

Other aspects of the visions are even more damaging to the declared Greek position regarding the events of the afterlife: In dramatic opposition to the assertions of the theory, which, it will be remembered, claimed no punishment – certainly not physical – for sinners before the Last Judgment, it is clear that if one sins, great suffering awaits immediately after death. In addition to Kosmas witnessing sinners caught by the demon and flung into the raging river, on his return journey he sees several more lakes of torture, filled with fire, vermin, and more. In Theodora's case, not only are the angels explicit about what will happen to the soul found wanting, but in the tale, the souls failing toll-gates are hauled away to a terrible fate; they are driven off into the abyss of fire, and bound and beaten. In yet another vision, Nicetas of Amnia is forced to cross a river of fire, filled with naked men in the grip of terrible tortures.[68]

The basic message of the visions, then, in contrast to the assertions of theory is that if one dies unexpiated, considerable suffering awaits, long before the day of final judgment. Perhaps even more damaging to the theory, however, is the lack of evidence of the possibility of release from these agonies. There is no sign of the benign forgiveness by God's good grace so frequently (and recklessly?) promised by the Greeks in their debates with the Latins. If help is available, it is in the form of a protective figure in the beyond, Theodora's spiritual father, or the apostles who materialize in order to help Kosmas; but even this is only before or at a gate, not after having failed it. Once in punishment, there is no rescue. There seems in fact to be no possibility of any improvement in the position of the sinner once he or she has been caught. The clear sense of both of our visions is that once someone has been hauled off, that is much the end of that particular story. There is no sense at all that the abyss on the wrong side of the toll-gates is a temporary punishment, after which one will be redeemed. It is not seen as the place to pay one's fine before proceeding: no suffering for a term and then release, as in Purgatory. This is explicitly

[67] Wortley, "Death, Judgment," 61.

[68] This vision is contained in the Life of S. Philaretos. The text is published and translated in "La vie de S. Philarète," ed. and trans. M.-H. Fournay and M. Leroy, *Byzantion* 9 (1934): 85–167.

stated by one of Theodora's angels: the sinner will be taken away to await the Last Judgment. The message is powerful and direct. There is no absolution possible after a failed gate, only long-term suffering until the final day.

Moreover, it is not only in visions that such events are recorded. The thirteenth-century author Meletios Homologetes states:

> The time of death is full of consternation since all the tax collectors bring forward deeds and words, plans of thoughts, desires, and all that we have done when instructed by them, in obedience to our enemies . . . The powers . . . of Satan pick everyone out and examine minutely the things that are in the soul and body. They meet with us to cut and to chop, to forcibly drag us down because of the previous disposition we had towards them.[69]

And John Chrysostom too makes reference to similar things, particularly the frightful guardians of the toll-houses, demonstrating how far back the tradition goes:

> We must have at that time [i.e. at death] many prayers, many good deeds, much patronage from the angels, much guidance in the ascent of the air. For if when we travel to a strange country and town we need a guide, how much more is it necessary for us to have helpers and guides in order to pass safely by the principalities and powers and unseen world rulers of this air, whom the Holy Scripture calls pursuers and toll gatherers and tax leviers.[70]

It is interesting to observe the comments that a modern scholar makes upon these texts. Roncaglia states that the passage through the toll-gates can be seen as a process of progressive purification of those sins examined.[71] This however, must be regarded as an ingenious but unsuccessful attempt by a modern apologist to write down the difficulties inherent in the material. Roncaglia is trying to square the Byzantine theoretical notion of progressive purification and mystical deification with the rather different message of the visions, which proclaims that only if one is already cleared of a particular sin can one get through the gate. But there is no hint of the purification in the visions. Indeed, if the stain of sin is present, that is, if absolution for a specific transgression has not already been obtained, one is sure to suffer for ever more.

[69] Meletios Homologetes, *Alphabetalphabetos*, in S. Lauriotes (ed.), *O Athos* 2, 8–9 (1928), 582.

[70] John Chrysostom, "Concerning Endurance, and that which the Dead should not Bitterly Mourn," *PG* 60: 723–30. See R. Greenfield, *Traditions of Belief in Late Byzantine Demonology* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1988), 17.

[71] Roncaglia, in Bardanes, *Text on Purgatory*, 53.

The divergence between these texts and theory is best understood, I suggest, within the framework of the two contradictory principles of education and divine mercy sketched earlier. The visions in particular are not simply a neutral means for conveying information about the afterlife. Rather, they participate in the task of education and behavior regulation, and they do this with a twofold message. There is a clear dividing line in the stories brought about by death. Before then, agents are fully responsible for what their own fate in the afterlife will be. One's own piety and good deeds go a long way in canceling out sin, so that loosing is achieved primarily by each person's individual efforts. After death, however, all control over individual destiny has been lost. Judgment is made on one's past, now beyond reach in that it is done and cannot be changed; nor, most importantly, can amends be made. If any glimmer of hope is available in the marginal cases, it takes the form of dependence on some other, a spiritual helper of some sort.

The principle embodied in the visions, then, is that before death one can control one's own fate, and this should be done to the best of one's ability, because after death the matter is out of one's hands. All is harsh, bleak, and uncompromising. If one dies with sins against one's name, not having taken the opportunities for avoidance or cancelation offered in life, severe pains will be suffered, both until and after the Last Judgment. Better, then, not to die in any sin at all. Any dilution of the second half of the message by a reference to the forgiving capacities of God after death would correspondingly reduce its coercive power. The visions therefore take the extreme position that there is no forgiveness whatsoever after death, and this is the most effective educational deterrent possible.

Just like the practice of *epitimia*, then, the visions are about enforcing behavior in this life. As a participant in the overall system of the religion, they do this by taking up a particular position in relation to the afterlife. The terms within which they function are far more elaborate than a punishment procedure, but they operate along the same principles of preemption, education, and deterrence.

The theory, however, falls into the opposite camp. Its goal is not to enforce behavior, but rather to describe an ideal system as it stands. It is a discourse whose goal is an intellectual, metaphysical understanding of the nature of the divine, and this in turn concerns claims about the mercy and authority of God. It so happens that this is incompatible with some other areas of the religious system.

This difference is encapsulated by the different manner in which visions and theory deal with the problem of those in the middle state. As we saw in

the theory, owing to the fact that the *mesoi* are really awaiting forgiveness, they already seem to form a part of the blessed. By contrast, in the visions they belong rather with the damned. Anyone who dies unexpiated, has not sufficient good credit, and no generous patron, is condemned. Their fate is decided forever more, and nothing further can help. These souls do not live out their time in a special place, waiting for the prayers of the living to secure their release. They are rushed straightaway to Hell. In short, consonant with their educational bias there is no real place for true *mesoi* in the visions. They do not exist there.[72]

This vacillation in the status of these figures is caused by the fact that they form the axis of the conflict between the two systems we have been describing. In line with a suggestion made earlier, one may be tempted to read the variation in their treatment, and the general vagueness in relation to the subject as a whole, as being symptomatic of the fact that those in the middle do not constitute a relevant category for the Greeks. But the explanation turns out to be just the opposite. These individuals in the middle state prove to be fully relevant, forming the nodal point of two necessary incompatibilities. There is no option but to treat them differently, and then to ignore that difference, thus keeping apart the conceptual blocs to which they belong.

* * *

Now that we have examined both debates and visions, we have a much more complete, and rather different, idea of what we have been referring to as the large-scale field of operations or game with which our supplicants are concerned, with its two key component features. For the first of these, concerning the conflict as to the nature of the afterlife itself, if from the debates we received a picture of the Byzantine afterlife as largely benign, although with some punitive aspects, the visions paint an image that is just the opposite: it is overwhelmingly dark and negative. For the second, concerning the techniques or strategies for dealing with sin and sin loosing, we also encounter one new possibility not seen before, the counterbalancing of sin by good deeds. This should be added to the techniques that we saw earlier in the debates of forgiveness and the *epitimion*. And of course, the punishment penalty, the subject of so much discussion and denial in

[72] Only one exception to this is known to me, and that concerns the story of a rich man, Philentolos, who became quite saintly by donating all his goods to the poor. He was, however, also an inveterate fornicator. After his death, a monk, Kaioumos, had a vision in which he saw Philentolos suspended between Paradise and Hell: a true "middle," if ever there was one. On this vision see "La vision de Kaioumos," ed. and trans. F. Halkin, *Analecta Bollandiana* 63 (1945): 56–64.

the debates in relation to the *epitimion*, plays a much enhanced role in the visions as well.

With these details in mind, we are now in a stronger position to return to our inquiry investigating how gifts relate to the key elements so far uncovered. In the first place, it bears repeating that, as we mentioned earlier, gifts appear nowhere in any of the discourses of the afterlife, and we now see how glaring that omission is. No mention of them is made in the debates, nor in the visions, where we might most have expected to find them in evidence in the interactions with saints and spiritual figures. Guardian angels and spiritual fathers provide assistance, but none of this is brought about through the faculty of gifts.

In our earlier, preliminary comments, we saw that in relation to the key technique touted by the debates – forgiveness – gifts are not necessary. We then posed the question of whether they should be associated with *epitimia*, also unnecessary from the point of view of theory, as a punishment practice. On the one hand, given what we have now seen in the visions, it would be difficult to consider gift giving as a punishment in any significant sense. On the other hand, however, at the least, the purposes of deterrence are served in that the practice of gift giving implies the serious nature of transgression and sin. Gifts indicate that something special must be done, some action of one's own must be undertaken to achieve absolution and avoid punishment (a theme that will be of major significance for us in the next chapter.) Gift giving as a practice, then, marks out the initial behavior that leads to the necessity of making a gift in order to remedy it as a serious contravention. The specific nature of sin as a transgression is again reinforced. Thus although gifts cannot really be considered punishments, they do, in some respects line up on the track of deterrence, and against the declarations of theory, with its unilateral forgiveness of God, in which no direct action is taken by the sinner.

Further, this aspect of gift giving as acting to obtain absolution also connects it to the other principal methods or techniques of remission encountered within the visions, which are the imposition of a punishment penalty, or the counterbalance of good deeds. In both of these, again, as is the case with gift giving, some distinctive action on the part of the sinner is required, something is done that will act causally to have the sin revoked, and they are all to be differentiated in this respect from the unilateral forgiveness of God, in which no direct action is taken by the sinner.

Yet, although gift giving is related to these features in this way, there are also some significant differences in how it realizes its ends. When a sin is countered by a good deed or its benefit negated by a penalty, loosing is

achieved by the remedy acting upon the sin or sinner alone. Gifts, however, are aimed not at the sin itself, but at a judge. They thus put forward the idea that sin is not canceled out on the "internal" axis of the sinner or the sin, but that the process is achieved through the action and decision of an "external" agent. Sin remission thus takes on an entirely new, altogether more complicated, aspect.

This difference is profound in terms of how a sinner conceives of the whole notion of loosing and judgment. Rather than running along an abstract, impersonal track where sin and its benefit are "neutralized" through a device that simply functions counteractively to them, the whole process is seen instead in terms of the judge, the person who looks at the evidence and interprets it according to his own volition. In bringing into play a second person as the nodal point of loosing, gifts thus engender a complex net of truly social relations, with all the complexities that this implies, and from which issues such as power and domination are never far away. One's future depends on someone else, and bringing other beings into the equation makes things immeasurably more complex.

It is also the case, however, that by making the judge the center of the activity of forgiving, gifts have something in common with the principle of unilateral forgiveness, which also focuses on the role of the external figure in loosing. Yet as we noted earlier, there is a fundamental difference between these two as well. Gifts act causally to obtain loosing. They are given to elicit favor and influence judgment. In unilaterality, as the term implies, God operates by himself, acting out of divine love and grace. There is no causality, nothing the sinner must do – indeed, nothing he or she can do, being already dead – to invoke this loosing. It flows from God alone. There is still a large gulf, then, between gifts and the unilaterality of theory.

All told, the exact place of gifts in relation to the major themes identified earlier – the overall question of the harsh or benign character of the afterlife, and the technique of achieving sin loosing – is still rather mysterious. The central issue of the manner in which they act upon the holy figures to achieve their desired end, which is the question of technique, will be pursued in depth in the following chapter. For the rest of this chapter, however, we will further develop and calibrate our model of the conflicting views of the afterlife. This, too, will be essential for our subsequent understanding of the donor portrait.

* * *

If the divergence between the declarations of theory concerning forgiveness and the material revealed by the visions is marked, the case is not quite



Figure 3.14: Harrowing of Hell, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, lat. 9820, fol. 9r, tenth century.

so clear when we examine other areas of the afterlife. Although the quantity of hard deterrence in the visions comes as a surprise in the wake of the theory, it speaks to the same contradictions and complexities played out in the debates that there is also considerable support in other religious discourses for the less harsh nature of Byzantine attitudes. Take, for example, the image of the Anastasis. As traced by Kartsonis, a distinction exists between Eastern and Western modes in the representation of the scene. In the West, as exemplified by the scene in a tenth-century Exultet Roll in the Vatican, Adam and Eve are engulfed in flames as Christ rescues them (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, lat. 9820, fol. 9r, Fig. 3.14).[73] This clearly relates to purgatorial conceptions, as Adam and Eve are represented

[73] Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 84–85; M. Avery, *The Exultet Rolls of South Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), pl. 142.14.

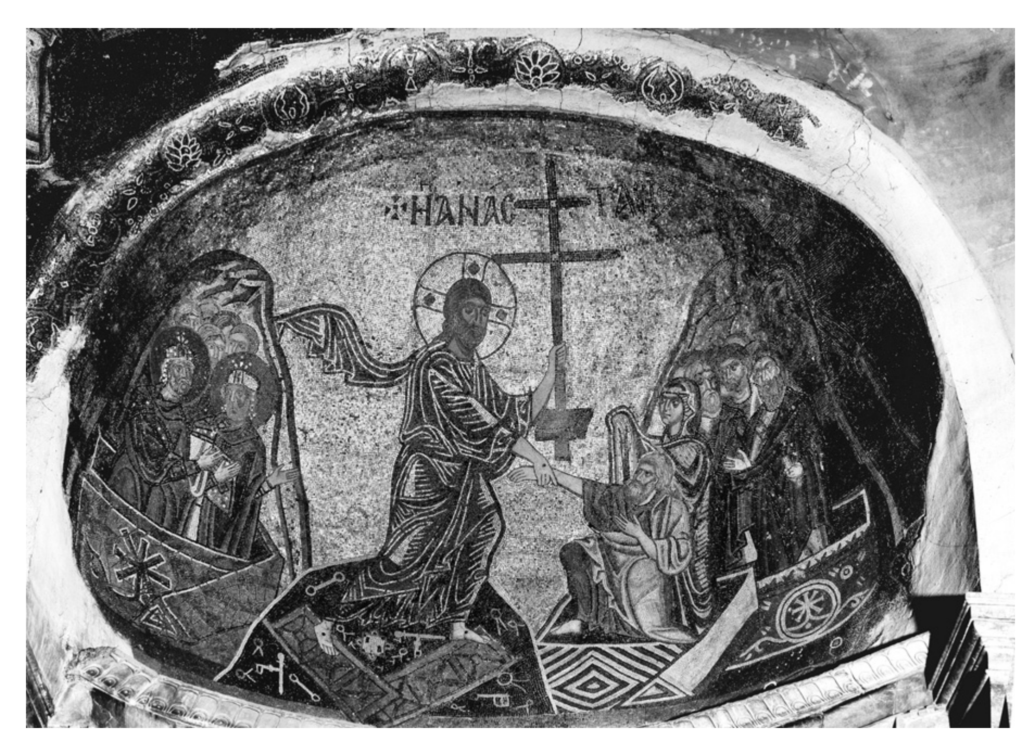


Figure 3.15: Anastasis, mosaic in north bay, Katholikon, Nea Moni, Chios, mid-eleventh century.

suffering by fire for their sins before they are saved. In the East, by contrast, as we see in the mid-eleventh century mosaic at the Nea Moni in Chios, Adam, Eve, and others are represented as having waited out the first part of their afterlife in a neutral zone, in which no fire is visible (Fig. 3.15).[74]

A similar effect, again pointed out by Kartsonis, can be seen in an early version of the Last Judgment that appears in a ninth-century manuscript of the Topography by the author now known as Kosmas Indicopleustes. The lowest register of the image shows the dead arising on Judgment Day, but the significant feature here is that they too emerge from an area in which there is neither fire nor darkness nor tormenting demons. These souls also have apparently spent their time until the final day in a place devoid of any specific characteristics (and certainly not fire), just as predicted by Byzantine theory (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, gr. 699, fol. 89r, Fig. 3.16).[75]

74 Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 214–16; Lazarev, *Storia*, 134–36.

75 Kartsonis, *Anastasis*, 84. On the miniature see C. Stornajolo, *Le miniature della topografia cristiana di Cosma Indicopleuste* (Milan: Hoepli, 1908), 45f., and Grabar, *l'empereur*, 251f. On the manuscripts in general, and on the question of their authorship, see M. Kominko,

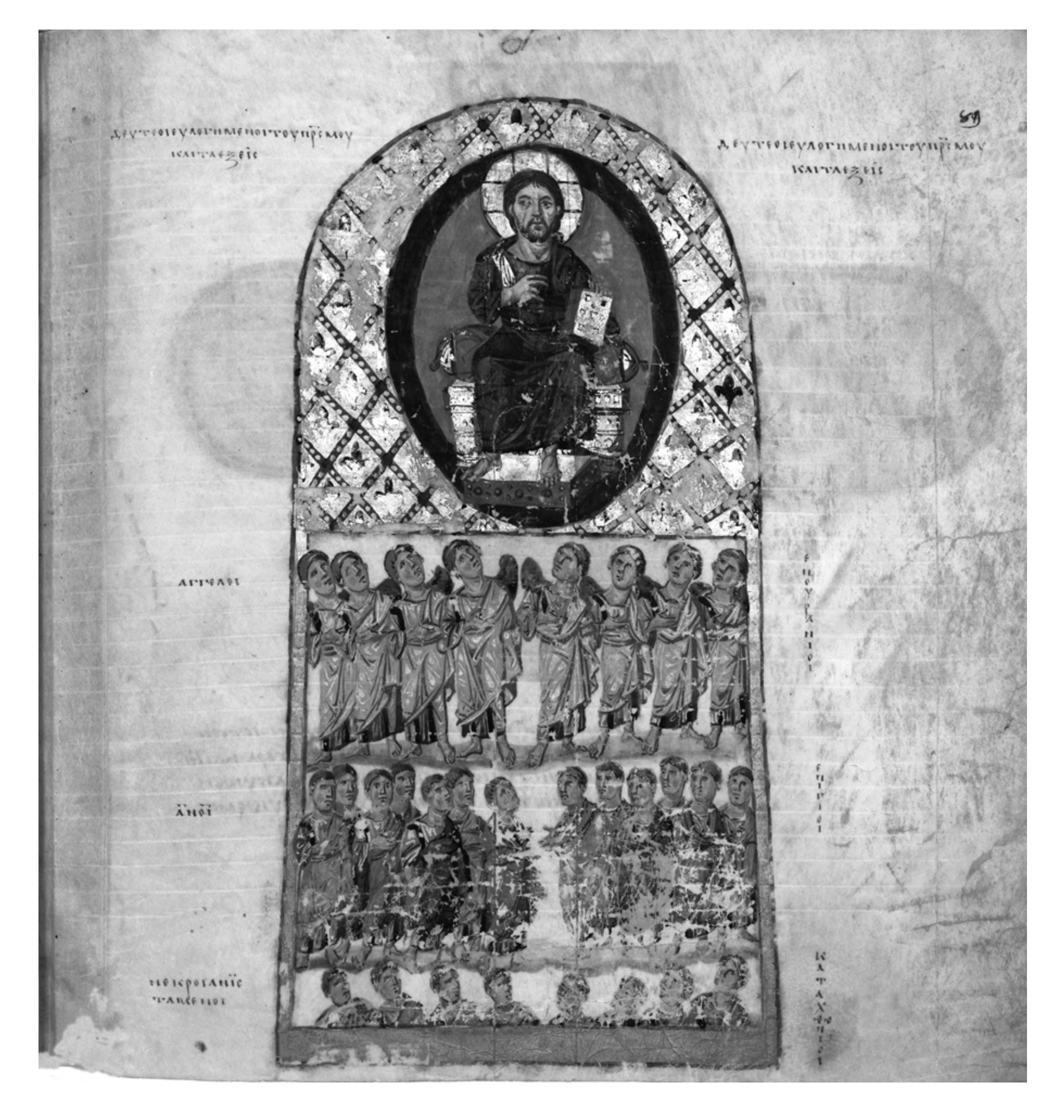


Figure 3.16: Last Judgment, Topography of Kosmas Indicopleustes, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, gr. 699, fol. 89r, mid-ninth century.

This last example brings us to one of the most vexing of issues concerning our current discussion of Byzantine attitudes to the afterlife, and the last of the major areas dealing with that theme that we will investigate: the visual representation of the Last Judgment itself. Nothing quite sums up the contradictions of the Byzantine position as neatly as this, which seems to bolster both sides simultaneously.

The World of Kosmas: Illustrated Byzantine Codices of the Christian Topography (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

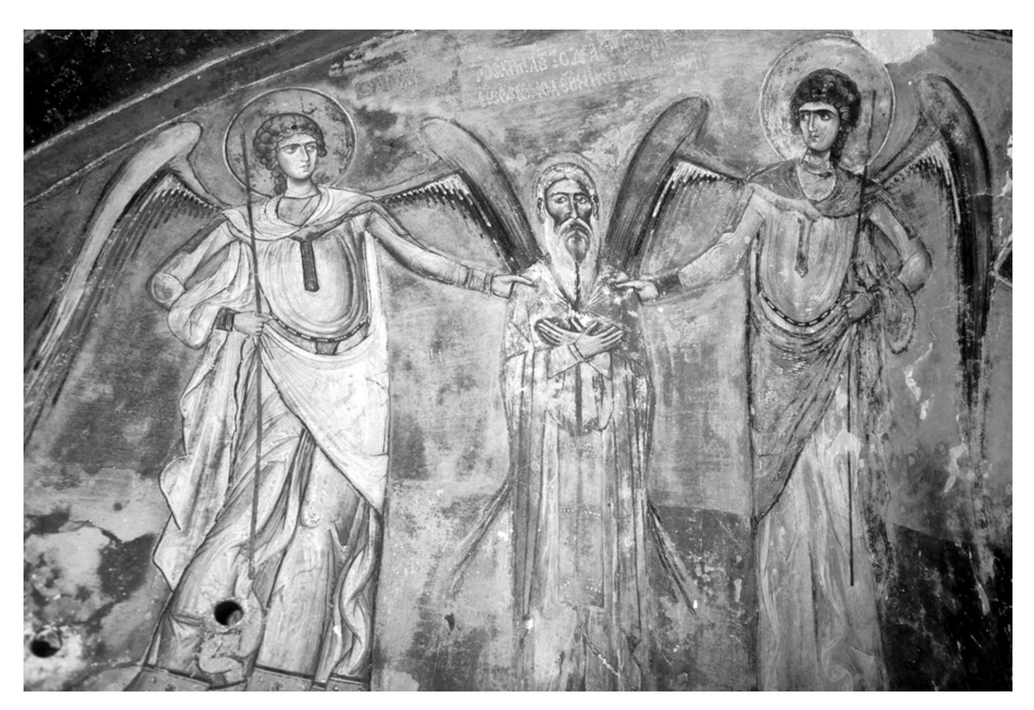


Figure 3.17: Neophytos and angels, painting in sanctuary of Enkleistera, Paphos, Cyprus, late twelfth century.

On the one hand, the scene is often mentioned as evidence for the non-punitive side of Byzantine theology, for several different reasons. In the first place, the scene is not as frequently encountered in Byzantium as in the West. At the late twelfth-century Enkleistera of Neophytos near Paphos in Cyprus, for example, there is no Last Judgment scene, despite the fact that the cave complex has an extensive decorative cycle. Neophytos alludes to his own afterlife by showing himself in the arms of the angels, and thus amongst the blessed, but shies away from showing the full scene in all its gory details (Fig. 3.17).[76] This phenomenon is usually ascribed to the very distance of the fearful and grim subject matter from the traditional Byzantine notions encapsulated in the theory.[77]

Furthermore, when the scene is present, the Byzantine images can be less bloodthirsty than the Western ones. In the representation in the Kariye Camii, which occupies a vast area, Der Nersessian has even detected a slight stress on salvation. In order to appreciate this, we need to return to the standard form of the image such as we find at Torcello (Fig. 3.1). In that scene, the registers below Christ and the apostles are evenly split between the

[76] See Cormack, *Writing in Gold*, chapter 6, for the Enkleistera, especially 239–42.

[77] Brenk, "Die Anfänge," at 125.

representation of the blessed and the damned. The Kariye Camii image (Fig. 3.7), by contrast, offers a substantial amount of its space to the blessed, and correspondingly less to the damned. In the main area of the vault, the blessed form three-quarters of a circle around Christ and the apostles, whereas the damned occupy only the lower right-hand section of the area. Further, the blessed are represented on three of the four pendentives over which the scene spreads, as well as the whole of the northern vault (visible on the left-hand side of our plate). The damned, again, are given only half of the southern lunette, itself pierced by a large window (visible in the lower right hand corner of our plate).[78]

Yet, here, the support of the Last Judgment images for Byzantine theory reaches an end. The scene may not be as widespread in Byzantium as in the West, but there certainly are numerous examples of it spread throughout the Orthodox world.[79] Furthermore, the underrepresentation of Hell at the Kariye Camii is unusual. The Torcello representation is in fact much more typical.

On occasion as well, the pendulum can swing in the other direction, and the imagery can be as harsh and insistent as anything found in the West. Consider for example the illustration that accompanies Psalm 6 in a psalter of 1059 in the Vatican. It presents a graphic scene of an angel forcibly pushing souls into a field of flames, depicted in a thoroughly attention-grabbing manner; to quote De Wald: "The entire miniature, with the exception of a strip of gold background at the left, is done in a brilliant red color, even the angel" (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, gr. 752, fol. 28r, Fig. 3.18).[80] The severity of this image becomes even more evident when considered in the context of the text that it accompanies, to which it bears a complex relation.

The psalm itself is one of the usual lament, bearing no ostensible connection to the images. As demonstrated by De Wald, however, the key to the illustrations is provided by the enigmatic words at the head of the psalm "Eis to Telos, en hymnois, uper tys ogdois" (until the end, in hymns, beyond the eighth). These refer to a commentary by Pseudo-Athanasios to this psalm, where he states that in the sixth age the world will end, in the seventh God will judge it, and in the eighth some will enter into eternal life, and others will suffer eternal punishment.[81]

78 Der Nersessian, "Program and Iconography," 329–31.

79 Der Nersessian, "Program and Iconography," 325–30 provides a listing of the major Eastern examples.

80 E. De Wald, *Illustrations in the Manuscripts of the Septuagint,* vol. III: *Psalms and Odes,* part 2, *Vaticanus Graecus 752* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1942), 9.

81 Pseudo-Athanasios, *Commentary on Psalms, PG* 27: 665–66. See De Wald, *Illustrations*, 9, and Brenk, *Tradition*, 87–88.

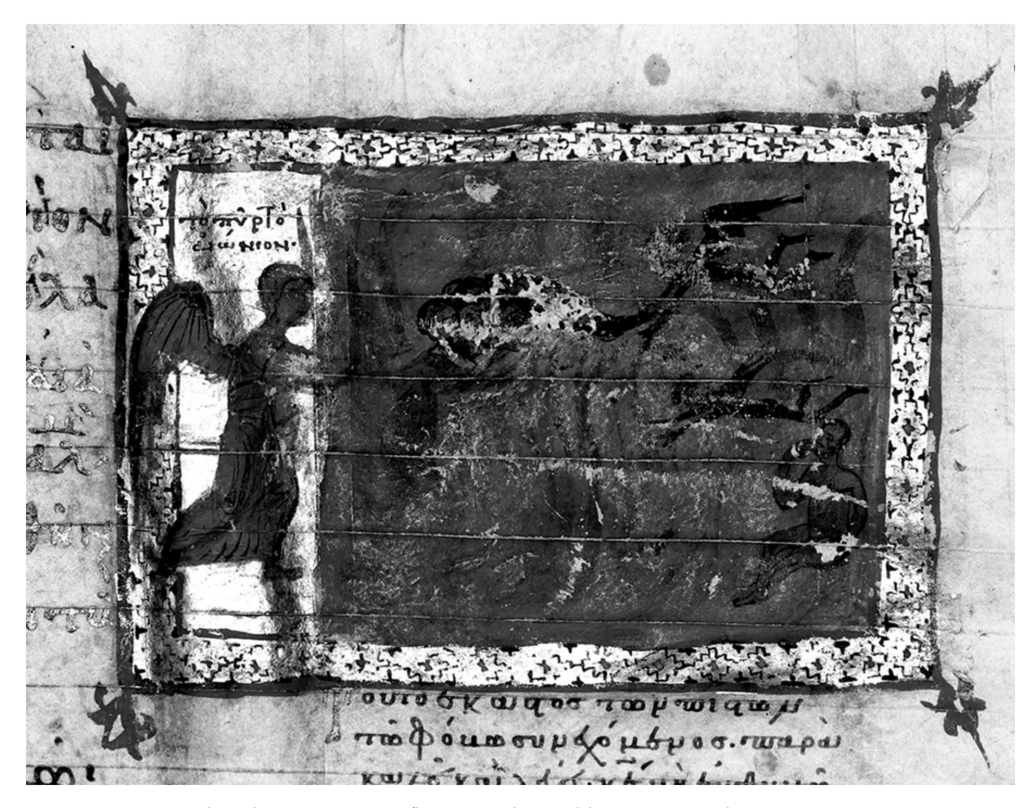


Figure 3.18: Angel pushes sinners into flames, psalter, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, gr. 752, fol. 28r, 1059.

What is distinctive here, however, is what the artist has chosen to illustrate in relation to this eighth age. Although Pseudo-Athanasios speaks of both eternal life and eternal punishment equally, it is only the everlasting fire that is represented. Once again it is the dark side that is emphasized.

Finally, it should be borne in mind as well that the iconographic schema of the Last Judgment was itself developed in Byzantium, not in the West.[82] In sum, then, it makes little sense to base an argument for the merciful aspect of Byzantine theology on Last Judgment scenes. Despite the representation of Paradise and the blessed, the fundamental message of the scene is harshly admonitory in nature, designed to cajole believers into certain types of behavior; in this respect it clearly matches up with the pedagogical, preventative aspect that we have so far been tracing. It should rather be aligned along with visions on the punitive side of the system,

[82] Brenk, *Tradition*, 92.

which, as we now see, forms a considerable (and upon closer inspection, ever growing) bloc.

Yet it is also one of the stranger aspects of the Purgatory debate and the workings of misrecognition that exactly this harsh aspect is not alien to the explicit Byzantine argument as made during the debates either. Even as the Greeks are insisting on God's mercy and forgiveness, one never finds them mitigating anything of the force of the Last Judgment itself. Indeed, one of the major Byzantine objections to Purgatory concerns precisely the idea that it compromises the severity of the Last Judgment. One of the first arguments that occurs to Bardanes, and an accusation repeatedly made by all on the Greek side, is that Purgatory was akin to the Origenist heresy of the *apokatastasis*.[83] This doctrine claimed that all sinners, even the worst, could ultimately be saved, and thus spared eternal damnation. Purgatory too, by allowing sins unforgiven at death to be "burned off" in the interim period immediately following death, spares even hardened sinners from the necessity of facing the full consequences of those sins at the Last Judgment.

Further, at Florence, this relation between *apokatastasis* and Purgatory was elaborated, and the argument was made that both "encourage laxity amongst the lax."[84] If everyone, even the most thoroughgoingly wicked, was assured of ultimate forgiveness, so that they would never be condemned to eternal Hell, then they could freely indulge in whatever vice they liked. The argument, in short, is one of deterrence. There must be a considerable penalty at the end of the road, or else deterrence is ineffective. What is most striking about this argument, of course, is the clarity with which the Byzantines saw the educational, normative value of the deterrence in relation to the *apokatastasis*, yet could not admit that the same principle necessarily applied to unpunished forgiveness at death. Nowhere are the contradictions in the Byzantine system more clearly to be seen, between the need to hold to the idea of a merciful, loving God who can simply forgive all sins and the demands of a normative structure of deterrence, which cannot allow sin loosing "for free."

* * *

Now that we have built up a more comprehensive picture of the intertwining currents concerning the afterlife, a key issue for us in pursuit of the

[83] *Bardanes, Text on Purgatory*, 60, 34–38 and *Bessarion of Nicaea, in Concile de Florence*, 3.14–15. For Origen, see for example his work *Prayer*, ed. J. Quasten and J. Plumpe, trans. J. O'Meara, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation 19 (New York: Newman, 1954), 27:15.

[84] Mark of Ephesos, in *Concile de Florence*, 3.19.10.

meaning of the gift is how these currents might be assimilated by the individual supplicant. That these confusing, contradictory aspects exist in Byzantine thought and culture is clear, but we have not yet considered how they will map out in terms of individual belief, "belief" being understood here in the complex, multilayered sense we have been discussing above. For, as we will see, the way that the gift navigates these various components as they come to inhabit the individual constitutes a large part of its operation and, correspondingly, a major component of its meaning.

On the one hand, we might say that the theory and its declarations of mercy, arising so late in the day and being so obviously a response to pressure from outside, could hardly have carried much weight. Yet, although the theory was but recently developed, it was entirely in keeping with a long line of Byzantine mystical theology that stressed the loving bond possible between humanity and an infinite God of boundless generosity. Thus Gregory of Nazianzos could declare: "He is called the Spirit of God . . . that reveals, illumines, quickens, or rather is the very light and life; . . . that deifies . . . that perfects."[85] And Pseudo-Dionysios in the fifth century, Maximos the Confessor in the seventh, and Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth (to name but a few) might all agree with Symeon the New Theologian in the eleventh century when he rhapsodized:"Come, true light; come, eternal life; come, hidden mystery; come, treasure without name; come, unutterable thing; . . . come, incessant joy."[86]

Yet, when a supplicant contemplates the afterlife, a choice presents itself. A deep-rooted philosophical conception says that God will forgive. But it is a striking fact that whenever the afterlife is described in detail – and it is surely within the details that the battle for hearts and minds is won or lost – the outcome is always pain, not mercy. The theory of itself says rather blandly, "You will be forgiven of your sins." By contrast, the visions, and indeed the images that we have seen, paint an intricate story, filled with the minutiae of exactly what will happen, and in the process weave an entire detailed, seamless cosmography of great persuasive power. In doing this,

[85] Gregory of Nazianzos, *Fifth Theological Oration (Oration 31): On the Holy Spirit*, trans. C. Browne and J. Swallow, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, 7 (New York: Christian Literature Publishing, 1894), available at K. Knight (rev. and ed.), *New Advent.org* (www.newadvent.org/fathers/310231.htm), verse 29.

[86] Simeon the New Theologian, "Mystical Prayer," part of the *Divine Eros*, trans. D. Griggs (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2010), 33. On Byzantine mysticism in general, amongst a large bibliography, see I. Hausherr, "Les grands courants de la spiritualité orientale," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 1 (1935): 114–38; V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London: J. Clarke, 1957); J. McGuckin, *Standing in God's Holy Fire: The Byzantine Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2001).

they set the terms that enable one to conceive of oneself in the afterlife. They erect the cognitive framework within which all else is considered, and from which it is almost impossible to escape. When thinking of the afterlife, then, every believer already has at hand a vast familiarity with an interwoven web of characters, landscapes, events, storylines. The hierarchical setup of the universe they will be entering is known; so too the power brokers, the power spoilers, the precise way in which interactions will unfold, along with whatever modes of accommodation are possible. When picturing one's own trajectory through the afterlife, the imagination will surely be led by this compelling, seductive narrative.

All told, then, I believe it would have been a rash Byzantine indeed who would have thought of him- or herself failing a toll-gate or being tossed into Sinners River, and then being forgiven by God. The visions are so all-enveloping, seem to account for so much so completely in their narratives in terms of one's personal fate in the afterlife, that most people are likely to have been swayed by their overriding message.

Moreover, the specific detail to be found in the visions also dovetails perfectly with other aspects of Byzantine beliefs concerning the supernatural world, rendering them all the more plausible. Demons, the stock-in-trade of the visions, were the constant companions to all Byzantines, in life as much in death. To give but one example, the thirteenth-century author Nikephoros Blemmydes writes in his autobiography about building his monastery in a wild stretch of countryside. The task was made all the more difficult, he tells us, because "the spiritual beasts were . . . difficult to dislodge from their own haunts, and at sundown or later they would hurl stones. Those present could actually hear the blows and really see the stones thrown."[87] This high degree of belief in demons in general would no doubt render the visions all the more "true." Demons are the consummate straddlers of the line between life and death; there is a seamless overlap between their behavior on both sides of the border. Familiarity with their antics in one realm would no doubt reinforce the sense of the plausibility of their related activities in the other.

More striking evidence for the widespread nature of the kind of thinking that materializes in visions is also to be found in the iconographic schema

[87] Nikephoros Blemmydes, *A Partial Account*, trans. J. Munitiz, in J. Munitiz, *Nikephoros Blemmydes, a Partial Account* (Louvain: Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense, 1988), 2:47. For more on Byzantine otherworldly beliefs, see P. Joannou, "Les croyances démonologiques au XIé siècle," in Association Internationale des Études Byzantines, *Actes du VIe congrès international d'études byzantines, Paris, 1948* (Paris: École des hautes études à la Sorbonne, 1950), vol. I, 45–60.

of the Ladder of John Klimakos. The scene, inspired by the sixth-century work of John, a monk at St Katherine's Monastery in Sinai, represents monks climbing a ladder toward God, pictured at the upper right. The path, however, is shown to be perilous, as monks can be seen falling off and being grasped by demons as they plummet downward toward a gaping mouth of Hell (St. Katherine's Monastery, Sinai, late twelfth century, Fig. 3.19).[88] Martin, in his study of these scenes, notes that they constitute a notable departure from the Klimakos text itself, showing as they do monks crashing to disaster. These scenes, he notes, "conflict . . . with the conception expressed by the author, who certainly did not interpret the ascent as an invitation to potential destruction, but rather as a sure way to salvation."[89] Instead, he concludes, the illustrations to the text were composed under the influence of the Last Judgment, sometime around the eleventh century.

In addition to comparing these scenes to the Last Judgment, however, we should see them in the context of our broader investigation. On the one hand, the idea of failure followed by everlasting doom (prior to any day of judgment) is precisely one of the tropes of the visions, as is the extra narrative detail of the proliferating hordes of demons, always the many agents of the devil's dark work. The punitive aspect of Byzantine religion is once more on display here.

Yet this discussion also brings us to an intriguing point. In raising the question of the possible influence of either visions or the Last Judgment on the Klimakos scene, it also allows us to omit the Klimakos scene from the equation; we can then ask what the relation is, in terms of influence, simply between the visions and Last Judgment representations themselves.

On the one hand, the visions themselves are obviously dependent on the idea of the Last Judgment in that they are essentially over-eager anticipations of its fundamental principle of division into blessed and saved. But the visual image of the Last Judgment, in its elaborated form, might itself be said to be dependent on the visions – or at least on what might be called "vision thinking." With all its narrative detail, including the skulduggery of the demons at the scales, the scene surely owes more to the visions, where these imaginings are elaborated in the greatest detail, than vice versa.

[88] R. Nelson and K. Collins (eds.), *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006), 245–47.

[89] Martin, *Heavenly Ladder*, 14. For more on the illustrations of such scenes see K. Corrigan and N. Ševčenko, "'The Teaching of the Ladder': The Message of the Heavenly Ladder Image in Sinai ms. gr. 417," in A. Lymberopoulou (ed.), *Images of the Byzantine World: Visions, Messages and Meanings: Studies Presented to Leslie Brubaker* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 1–14.

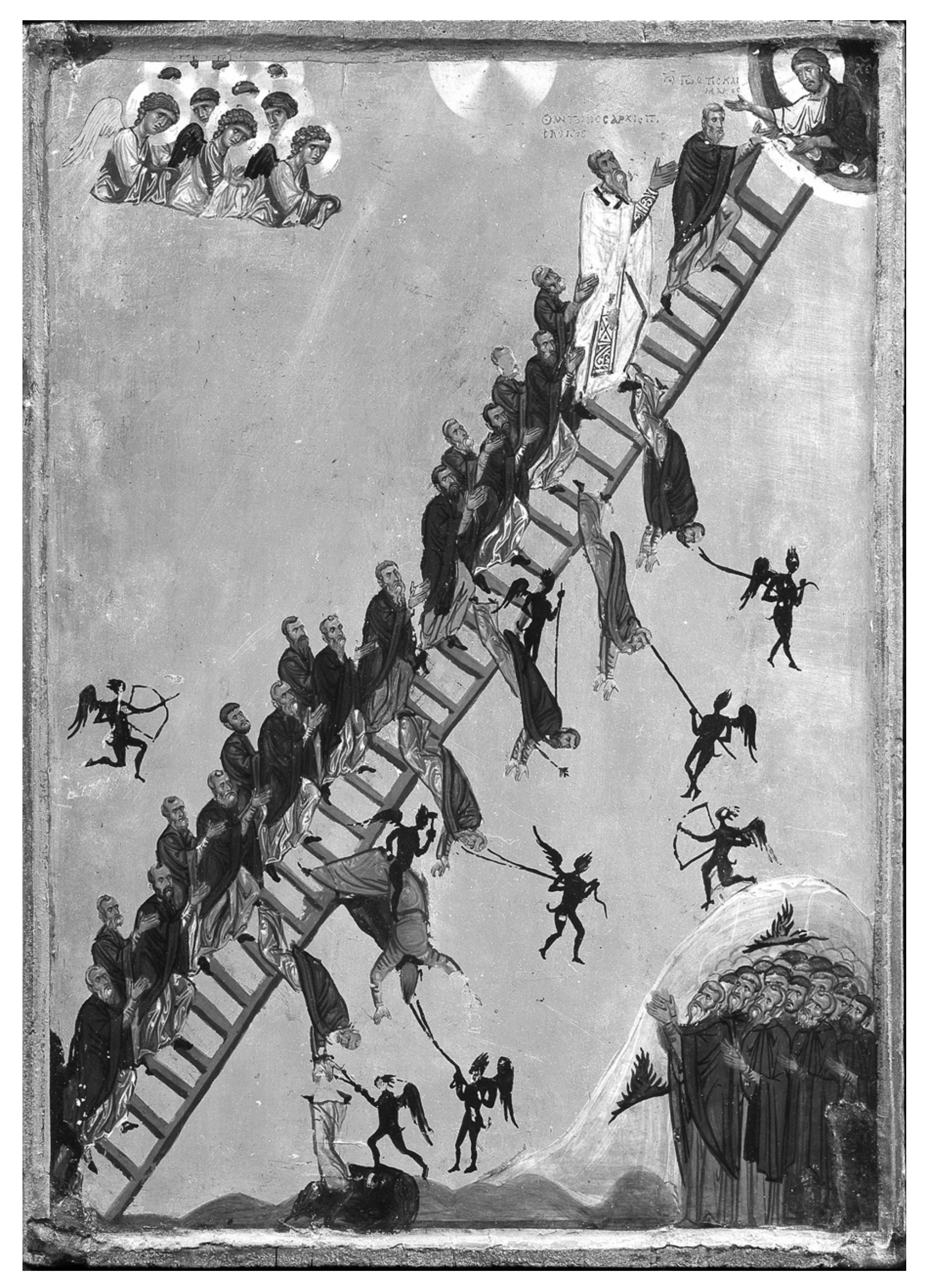


Figure 3.19: Heavenly Ladder of John Klimakos, icon, St. Katherine's Monastery, Sinai, late twelfth century.

An investigation of this issue is beyond the scope of the current book, but irrespective of which takes exact precedence, there are some significant conclusions to be drawn in any case. It will be recalled that the Last Judgment only settles into its complex visual form during the late eleventh century, not long before the Heavenly Ladder scheme is born. Further, the Vision of Kosmas dates to the tenth century, that of Gregory concerning Theodora to the late tenth or eleventh. It would seem, then, that it was around this period that there was an upsurge of interest in the harsher side of the events of the post-death experience. All of these forms fit into the same category of the punitive rather than the generous treatment of those found lacking. It is also surely no accident that the real increase in numbers of supplicant portraits themselves also begins in the eleventh century. On the one hand, they are part and parcel of this phenomenon of increased interest in the subject matter. Yet they are also, in a sense, the end product of it. The events of the afterlife are projected in dark, fearful, personal detail, which in turn provokes people to take steps to attempt to protect themselves and to ensure as smooth a passage after death as possible. The results of this are the donations, the entreaties, and the prayers that we see in the portraits.

These points allow us to confirm and expand on the argument made earlier about the relation of the gifts represented in our portraits to the competing claims regarding the benign or punitive nature of the afterlife. They belong on the harsh side of the spectrum not because they are a punishment in and of themselves, but because that is the side that, within the theater of the afterlife, is the one most likely to occupy the thoughts of the supplicants contemplating what awaits them. It is this dark vision that solicits the gift in the first instance.

With this conclusion, we have also completed the first leg of our inquiry into the meaning of the portraits. Our fuller explication of that meaning will be based, in part, on that understanding. With this conclusion, as well, we may return to our earlier contention that the meaning of the gift itself is shaped by – determined by – specific features of the large-scale theater of operations within which it is located. Had we taken the theorists of the Byzantine position on Purgatory at their word about the absence of punishment, we would have seen the gifts as relating to the Byzantine conception of mercy. Or indeed, we might have been tempted to declare that the gift is poised between the two positions, pushed on the one side by fear, and pulled on the other by the prospect of redemption. The key determining factor, we now see, is not simply the presence of one – or, indeed, both – of the conflicting sides; rather, it is the way in which the

competing discourses calibrate against each other as they come to be lodged within the individual. The significant question is which of the two wins the battle to colonize the psyche (perhaps we might call it the "imaginative belief-system") of the supplicant. In this respect, it is the darker side that generates the donor's "world-picture," the associative universe, as the gift is made. That gift is drawn forth in fear, and its major purpose is not necessarily what it obtains (perhaps Paradise), but the punishments that it avoids. Its primary function, we might say, is one of negation. This is, in part, the very meaning of the gift, and we see here how that meaning is determined by the the preexisting structures into which it is fitted.

Given the above, several subsidiary questions arise. Would the afterlife that our Byzantine supplicants project end up looking much like that of a Westerner thinking of Purgatory? And if this is so, what becomes of the Byzantine theory of mercy? And lastly, how does that Byzantine conception of mercy relate to the gift? The answers, again, will take us further in our understanding of the portraits.

To begin with the Purgatory question, the answer is partly yes and partly no, with some surprising twists. Concerning the issue of suffering: pain there is aplenty in the Byzantine afterlife, but this is not Western pain. The suffering in Purgatory, so strongly opposed by Byzantine theory, has a purificatory effect; it is *because of* the torment that is undergone there that one then proceeds to the blessed realms. In the Byzantine visions, by contrast, the pain and torture has no motive force, causes nothing to change in the status of the sinner, as it does in Purgatory. No absolution or purification follows on from it.

On the one hand, this difference is of great significance because it shows a covert agreement between, of all things, visions and theory. The official position adhered to by all in the Byzantine camp during the debates is that there is no punishment of souls for purification, and this is indeed borne out in the visions. Yet, the strange corollary of this in the visions is that there is an abundance of torture for no purpose at all. In contradiction with what is repeatedly said on the issue by all concerned, the Byzantine system as articulated in visions is even harsher and more stringent than Purgatory, which at least offers a second chance. Purgatory may look like cruel legalism from one point of view, but from another it allows for salvation deeper into the stretch of time than the visions, which shut the door at death.

Thus for all that the Latins sound like the harsher side in their proclamations, the Byzantine visions are in fact less generous than Purgatory, and

the Greeks live within a stricter, narrower system than the Latins. In this respect, Byzantium shows its steely underside, mirroring again the argument found in the theoretical exposition, that Purgatory is too lenient. Yet again, we have confirmed our argument for the harsh side of the Byzantine system as constituting part of the meaning of the gift.

Yet if this is the case, what does it mean to state, as we have been doing, that God's loving forgiveness is part of the belief-system of the afterlife? Where does the oft-declared mercy of God fit in? The answer is, in a sense, that it does not; and this is precisely the point. The theory of mercy, strongly held, deeply believed in, does not interact in any way with the piece-by-piece detail of projecting an image of the afterlife, which is almost always unrelentingly grim, and which is also the one, as I have been arguing, that feeds into the gift. The concept of the mercy of God exists within a separate, self-enclosed belief-system, one that does not overlap with those details.

In effect, then, there is not one structure in operation, but two, and, as we have been implying all along, the logic that they operate on is two, not one. There is a temptation when looking at the evidence for the more generous elements of the Byzantine afterlife, the arguments against the cruelty of Purgatory and for divine love, to conclude that this merciful side acts upon the punitive side and mollifies it, counteracts it, rendering the belief-system as a whole softer. However, this is to conceive of the two structures as functioning only on one track, so that the one cancels out the other. But each operates on its own axis, and thus their opposing aspects never meet up. The concept of the mercy of God never crosses paths with the grim reality of punishment in the afterlife, nor does it lessen the need of the supplicants in our images to give a gift. This, in essence, is the meaning of misrecognition. The belief in mercy does not negate the punishment. They coexist simultaneously, but in two entirely different zones. God may be merciful and loving – that may be one of his particular properties when he is considered and described in the abstract, or when one seeks mystical union with him through prayer and meditation – but that aspect does not show through in the world encapsulated by visions. Byzantine theory, as we have been suggesting all along, belongs to a different framework, trope, medium, and makes itself manifest in a different conceptual space. It is in other spheres that the greater power and mercy of God show through.

Within this divided world, our portraits line up on one side, but not on the other. We mentioned above that although it would be tempting to declare that the gift is positioned between the two sides of fear and redemption, this is not the case. We may now further elaborate on that

point. Mercy is certainly required of God for forgiveness, but the mercy invoked by the gift is not of the deep, especially Byzantine sort. Indeed, it might not be that different from what a Latin believer might expect. The donor portrait is indeed of the world of the visions. That it still bears a relation to the issues represented by the specifically Byzantine view of God we will see in the next chapter, but not in this respect.

* * *

In this chapter we have been pursuing the way in which the portraits are positioned in relation to the conflict in the theater of the afterlife. In so doing, we have, effectively, been investigating the meaning of the scenes in their passive rather than in their active capacities (in the sense in which we referred to these terms in Chapter 1).[90] In the following chapter we will turn our attention to their dynamic, functional role, which, we will see, builds on what we have seen so far. We should note, however, that although the portraits appear in no other areas that deal with the afterlife, they still form part and parcel of that overall system, and, through their alignment with one of the sides there, they participate, in some small degree, in expanding the reach of that side. Thus, even from this perspective, we see the portraits as being something more than simply passive images. Within the large-scale theater of the afterlife, they are certainly not innocent bystanders. By way of concluding this chapter, then, let us say a few final words about that theater, of which the portraits are a constituent part, as a complex, overarching formation of belief.

Strange though it may seem to our eyes, it could be argued that the dual but separate existence of two contradictory structures within one all-encompassing belief-system is also the strongest point of that system. Here we approach the crux of the two-logic formation, for what it means is that the Byzantines obtain the best of both worlds. They get deterrence undisturbed by clemency, and mercy unclouded by cruelty. Their system renders to them a virulent afterlife laden with punishment, suffering, and no hope of release, harsher even than Purgatory. Yet, playing simultaneously, accompanying the Byzantine believer at every step, is an image of an all-powerful, yet compassionate, gracious God, the same God of whom Gregory of Nazianzos could write: "Are you not ashamed by the mercy of Jesus, who took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses; . . . who will have mercy rather than sacrifice; who forgives sins till seventy times seven."[91] This is the same

[90] As for note 5 above, see Introduction, pp. 7–8.

[91] Gregory of Nazianzos, *Oration 39: Oration on the Holy Lights*, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace, trans. C. Browne and J. Swallow, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, 7 (New York:

God, too, whom one aspires to be close to, along with Gregory of Sinai, in a rapture that "is the complete ascent of the soul's force towards the majesty of the glory of god, now revealed as a seamless unity . . . This deep desire for God . . . is a spiritual intoxication that arouses all our longing."[92] In short, this is a fully functioning system that includes within itself the deepest, most extreme of conceptions, profound precisely because contradictory, profound precisely because it allows the contradictory structures to coexist without interference.

In sum, we see how delicately balanced the system was, how constrained in its room to maneuver, and how costly to achieve its ultimate form. Yet this was true for the competing system put forward by the Latins as well. Both sides were juggling with a sequence of similar elements: on the one hand practices, narratives, and images that are fundamentally admonitory, pedagogical, and punitive; on the other a theology that sought to describe God in the most positive terms possible. Perhaps the most occluded aspect, however, the most difficult to spot as an independent feature itself, was the type of logic that would bind the system together, functioning as a kind of intellectual glue, combining the disparate elements in a particular relation to each other. Each of these was variable, each could be sacrificed in the service of the other. The Latins committed themselves to coherence with practice, projecting one of the techniques of loosing in life into death. Yet, as we have said, to do this they had to surrender something of the power and mercy of God.

This was not a price, however, that the Byzantines were willing to pay. Thus, although starting from a similar base in practice, they sacrificed external coherence with that practice, but not internal coherence with rational argument itself. Seen from a modern standpoint valuing rationality and single-point consistency, itself an outgrowth of the same impulses that lead to Latin legalism, the Western structure may seem to be better, its compromises less noticeable. But in the final analysis, the Byzantine structure makes available to its adherents a deep, complex, multilayered form of spiritual life otherwise unavailable within the strictures of a system consistent with itself. It is this system that the portraits are part of, and help to sustain.

Christian Literature Publishing, 1894), available at K. Knight (rev. and ed.), *New Advent.org* (www.newadvent.org/fathers/310239.htm), verse 18.

[92] Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrines*, 58–59, published in G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware (eds. and trans.), *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, vol. IV (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).

4 Exchange and Non-Exchange: The Gift between Human and Divine

In the main donor page of the Leo Bible in the Vatican seen earlier, Leo occupies an awkward position (Fig. 0.2). It is instructive to compare this scene to the one that appears on the subsequent page of the manuscript, showing Leo's brother Constantine, and the head of the monastery that Leo had founded, Abbot Makar, both flanking St. Nikolas (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, Reg. gr. 1, fol. 3r, 930–40, Fig. 4.1). Here, both Constantine and Makar are in full *proskynesis*. With Leo, however, as his knees sink, so he raises his arms to proffer the codex to the Virgin. His stance, we may speculate, is the result of a compromise: he seems to be caught between the pose of abjection he perhaps feels he ought to be occupying (as the others do) and his yearning for the direct contact that his gift can achieve. It is the gift that hauls him upward. This is the very act of donation that we are witnessing here, the giver, the gift, the recipient, all bound together in an act of collusion, as the Virgin stoops slightly, hand outstretched, to receive the offering.[1]

Yet what, exactly, is at stake in this interaction between the two? What is it that passes between them, and how does it operate? In the previous chapter we saw that the gift differs from the other techniques of sin loosing encountered within the field of operations constituted by the afterlife. It neither washes sin away (as in forgiveness) nor reestablishes a balance by countering an evil deed with a good one, nor, again, does it reestablish a balance by countering an illicit pleasure with pain (as does punishment). Nor does it serve as a deterrent to future sin (punishment again). Rather, the strategy it chooses in pursuit of its goal is influence. Not operating directly on sin itself, it instead draws a third element into the process of loosing, in the form of the person of a judge (or assistant), and seeks to sway that judge in the supplicant's favor.

The contact portrait itself is, at its most basic level, a testament to this desire to exert influence; and for the donor portrait in particular, the means

[1] For more on these scenes, and for the extensive bibliography attaching to them, see S. Dufrenne, "Les miniatures," in P. Canart (ed.), *La Bible du Patrice Léon. Codex reginensis graecus 1. Commentaire codicologique, paléographique, philologique et artistique*, Studi e testi 436 (Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2011), 81–184, at 93–98.

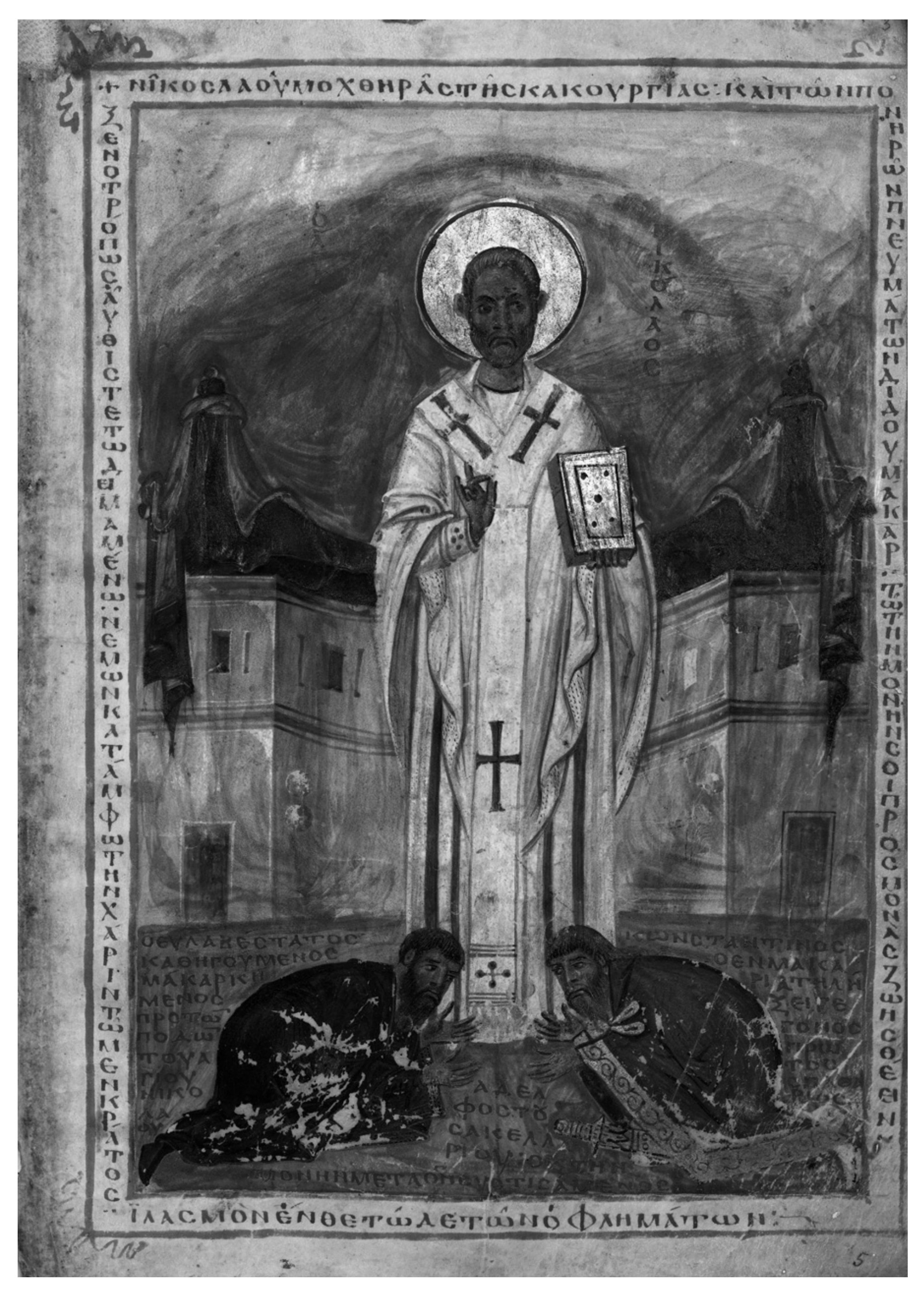


Figure 4.1: Makar and Constantine before St. Nikolas, Leo Bible, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, Reg. gr. 1, fol. 3r, 930–40.

selected to carry the desire through to fruition is the gift. Yet, the means by which this process works is not self-evident, and requires further investigation. We are here in pursuit of the second key component of what we earlier defined as the meaning of the gift: its mode of functioning.

The inscription that accompanies the portrait of Basil in the Megale Panhagia ms. 1 in Jerusalem, which we saw earlier, seems to give voice to what donors of all sorts have in mind (Fig. 1.27). It takes the form of an address by Basil to the Virgin: "I offer you this masterpiece, requesting that you receive me in return."[2] Something is given, and something is requested in return, on the principle of exchange. Lassus, contemplating similar donations made by Christians in Syria, writes that they operate as "a request supported by a gift, which should earn from God a particular benevolence. The donor asks for compensation for his act of generosity."[3] Mundell-Mango summarizes much the same point in the following way: "The gift offered was a 'ticket' bought in advance to receive the desired favor, even if the favor was not delivered until later." And then she adds to this, "If so, such a practice directed towards the almighty and his saints in a sense paralleled the widespread contemporary bribery of state officials in order to obtain favors."[4]

A famous image in an eleventh-century manuscript of the Homilies of John Chrysostom in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (Coislin 79) seems to demonstrate something of the parallels Mundell-Mango is contemplating.[5] On fol. 2v the emperor, labeled as Nikephoros Botaneiates, stands in the center, gorgeously caparisoned, upon a peacock footstool. To his left stands the Archangel Michael, bowing his head slightly, hand raised in a gesture of intercession. To the emperor's right stands John Chrysostom, proffering his book to the emperor. At the bottom of the page, to the left of the emperor's footstool, appears a tiny figure in *proskynesis*, dressed in a hat and cloak. According to Dumitrescu, he is a secular official, and

[2] Προσενέ[γ]κω σύ τόδε τό μεγαλ[ε]ῖον καί [αἰ]τούμενος ἀντίλυτρος λαβεῖν με. See Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 58. On the manuscript and its miniatures, see Lake and Lake, *Greek Minuscule Manuscripts*, vol. V, no. 213.

[3] J. Lassus, *Sanctuaires chrétiens de la Syrie* (Paris: P. Geuthner, 1947), 255.

[4] M. Mundell-Mango, *Silver from Early Byzantium: The Kaper Koraon and Related Treasures* (Baltimore: Walters Art Gallery, 1986), 5.

[5] H. Omont, *Fac-similés des miniatures des plus anciens manuscrits grecs de la Bibliothèque nationale du VIe au XIe siècle* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1902); Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 107–18; C. Dumitrescu, "Quelques remarques en marge du Coislin. 79: les trois eunuques et le problème du donateur," *Byzantion* 57 (1987): 32–45. See also H. Maguire, "Images of the Court," in H. Evans and W. Wixom (eds.), *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, AD 843–1261* (New York: Abrams, 1997), 183–91, at 184–86, and his catalogue entry for the manuscript in the same volume, at 207–09.

a eunuch (Fig. 4.2).[6] The accompanying inscription, written in the voice of Chrysostom, says:

> While I am your guardian, oh wearer of the crown,
> as I know the outcome of events themselves,
> the one possessed of gilded mouth and speech,
> the author, stands in entreaty
> asking with us your goodwill for the scribe [*grapheos*]:
> may you favor and support him, oh King.[7]

The tiny figure (referred to as the *grapheos*), it is clear, is a donor of the manuscript, presenting to the emperor a copy of the Homilies, via the composer of the works himself. And even though given an extra layer of elliptic complexity because relayed though the speech of Chrysostom, it is also clear that the donor is asking the emperor for special favor in return, in a way that is strongly reminiscent of Basil's request to the Virgin.

Yet, despite the apparent similarities between the two pictures and their inscriptions, the exact form of interchange that takes place between the agents involved in each of the scenes is structurally very different. As was mentioned in the Introduction, exchange between humans is not quite the same as that which takes place when the agents involved are humans and God. Indeed, as the chapter unfolds, the particular notions of exchange underpinning the comments by Lassus and Mundell-Mango above will be seen to be not fully congruent with our contact portraits.

The scene in ms. Coislin 79 just described is but one of three related representations that appear in this manuscript, and together they form one of the most lavish suites of images in the surviving Byzantine corpus. The other two are similarly extravagant and sophisticated, and all voice similar requests for favor. Later in the chapter we will take these images as a secular counterexample to our contact portraits, and investigate the ways in which they differ from our religious examples in relation to exchange. Before beginning with that task, however, the images are worth pausing over and examining in a slightly different context. They have a complex history that raises several issues relevant to our inquiry so far, specifically in connection with the discussions in Chapters 1 and 2 in relation to the pursuit of the identity of the figures portrayed in our scenes.

* * *

A further scene within the manuscript shows a monk, named as Sabbas, gesturing at a book that stands before him on a lectern. He appears to be

[6] Dumitrescu, "Quelques remarques," 41. [7] Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 112.



Figure 4.2: Emperor, Archangel Michael, John Chrysostom, Homilies of John Chrysostom, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Coislin 79, fol. 2v, eleventh century.

expounding on the book to the emperor, identified again (as indeed he is in every one of the miniatures) as Nikephoros Botaneiates, who sits frontally beneath a canopy, listening attentively (fol. 2bis-r, Fig. 4.3). The inscription reads:

> Oh famous sceptre-bearer at the apex among kings,
> be charmed by the delights of words,
> and gladden the soul and applaud, rejoicing;
> reward your servants with a generous hand.[8]

Fol. 2r contains the most complex image of the set, representing the emperor enthroned, surrounded by courtiers. At his shoulders are personifications of Truth and Justice. Flanking him on either side are smaller high court officials, who, turn their heads towards him (Fig. 4.4). The inscription on this page states:

> You hold the throne, shining as if luminescent,
> crowned with virtues in abundance;
> beside you stand the highest of your loyal subjects,
> chosen men, thoroughly noble in soul.
> But now, oh King, show sympathy for the scribe [*grapheos*],
> for he bears the utmost loyalty towards your sovereignty.[9]

In addition to these images, fol. 2bis-v also contains a brilliant coronation, a diminutive Christ hovering over the emperor and empress (Fig. 4.5).

As gorgeous as these pages are, there are also some unusual features about them that have drawn the attention of researchers. The first publisher of the manuscript, Omont, noted that they are not all of one piece. Rather, each is made up of two separate parts: the outer perimeter of the images consists of plain parchment frames, on which inscriptions have been written. Into these frames have been pasted the central, gold-grounded panels on which the portraits are painted. The junctions between these two parts of the images can be clearly seen, particularly in the lower right of fol. 2v, where the border, no doubt painted expressly to conceal the join, does not quite do its job.[10]

Omont surmised that this unusual situation was brought about because the pages had originally contained portraits of another emperor, probably Michael VII, who was Nikephoros Botaneiates's predecessor on the throne. These earlier portraits, Omont believed, were probably cut out of their

[8] Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 108. [9] Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 110–11.
[10] Omont, *Fac-similés*, 32, note 5, and Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 113.



Figure 4.3: Monk Sabbas before emperor, Homilies of John Chrysostom, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Coislin 79, fol. 2bis-r, eleventh century.



Figure 4.4: Emperor and courtiers, Homilies of John Chrysostom, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Coislin 79, fol. 2r, eleventh century.



Figure 4.5: Imperial coronation, Homilies of John Chrysostom, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Coislin 79, fol. 2bis-v, eleventh century.

sheets, and substituted with the ones that we currently see when Michael was replaced.[11]

Spatharakis, however, challenged this interpretation. Carefully examining the portraits of the emperor, he noted that they had been altered. For example, in the coronation scene (fol. 2bis-v, Fig 4.5) one can see that the beard has been lengthened so that it now partly covers the row of pearls at the emperor's neck. Further, some white strokes were added to the area below the lips to make the figure look older than the less-than-thirty year-old Michael VII (Fig. 4.6). Spatharakis therefore concluded that these portraits were not replacements for earlier ones representing Michael, but were themselves the portraits of Michael as originally executed, although they were later changed in an effort to make them resemble the older Nikephoros.

Spatharakis further argued that if the portraits were the originals done for the manuscript, then it must be the case that the parchment frames onto which they are pasted were new, probably substituting for earlier ones that contained verses mentioning Michael by name. The current verses, by contrast, although lavish in their praise of the emperor, are rather general in their address, and do not mention anyone specific by name.

As confirmation of his hypothesis, Spatharakis further noted that in the coronation scene, only the portrait of the emperor had been altered. The face of the empress Maria had not been touched. The reason for this was that there was no necessity to change her image; her portrait had stood alongside that of Michael VII in the first incarnation of the scene because he was her first husband, Nikephoros replacing him in that role as well when he ascended the throne. As wife and empress to both men, her image could remain the same, while the male portrait had to be changed.[12]

This sequence of events has been confirmed by Dumitrescu, who added some further refinements to the analysis. She noted that the scene of the monk reading to the emperor (fol. 2bis-r, Fig 4.3) is by a different hand to the other three pages. Further, the portrait of the emperor here has not been altered. She therefore concluded that the manuscript originally contained just three images – the coronation, the courtiers page, and the scene

[11] Omont, *Fac-similés*, 32, note 5. For more on Michael VII, see M. Angold, "After the Fourth Crusade: The Greek Rump States and the Recovery of Byzantium," in J. Shepard (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire, c. 500–1492* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 731–58, especially 752–58.

[12] Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 112–18. For more on the transition of power from Michael VII to Nikephoros Botaneiates, see M. Angold, "Belle Époque or Crisis (1025–1118)?" in J. Shepard (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Byzantine Empire, c. 500–1492* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 583–626, especially 608–10.



Figure 4.6: Head of emperor, detail, Fig. 4.5, imperial coronation, Homilies of John Chrysostom, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Coislin 79, fol. 2bis-v.

with John Chrysostom and the tiny donor (fols. 2bis-v, 2v, 2r) – and that these had been commissioned in readiness for a donation to Michael VII. Before it could be presented, however, the emperor was overthrown, and it remained in private hands (perhaps amongst a group of palace officials). Later, at an opportune moment, the three portraits were altered and relabeled, excised from their surrounding sheets and repasted into fresh frames, themselves containing new inscriptions. A new portrait was added

as well, this one a "real" likeness of Nikephoros, and the whole manuscript donated to the new emperor.[13]

In the following discussion, let us concentrate on the three original scenes. In the first place, this complex story bears directly on our examination in the first chapter of the issue of the patron's identity, for it demonstrates in certain respects how unimportant the individual personalities are. Whoever the donor is, whether scribe or artist, he is someone with a *ktetor*'s relationship to the manuscript, which includes the right to donate it to the emperor. More significant, however, is an additional point that emerges, to the effect that to the donor it does not matter who, exactly, the emperor is; whether yesterday's or today's, it makes little difference. Despite the appearance of extreme personalization in carefully crafted words and images, the truth is that the emperor himself is interchangeable.

Yet if the recipient in the form of the emperor may change, what nonetheless remains constant is the structural transaction of gift exchange. The syntax of exchange, gift, and reciprocation remains mutually intelligible irrespective of who the emperor, or the donor, happens to be. What counts is not who the agents are as individuals, but their position within the structures and mechanisms of gift exchange. It is this aspect of transpersonal exchange that forms the main subject of this chapter.

Before proceeding to that discussion, however, there remains a further point to be made concerning the issue of identity in relation to structure. In all conventional senses of the word, these depictions of the emperor in ms. Coislin 79 are portraits. Yet, it is not at all clear of whom, exactly, they are portraits. Despite the presence of unequivocal inscriptions stating that the figure is Nikephoros Botaneiates, Spatharakis, one of the most careful readers of these scenes, still insists on labeling his close-up photograph of the male figure in the coronation portrait Michael VII.[14]

Let us consider in greater detail the alterations that have been made here. In all images, the predominant changes largely affect what we today would consider secondary features, mostly the shape and color of the beard. These are not aspects related to what might be thought of as the essential portrait physiognomy of skin and bone. This is fully in keeping with what we know from Maguire, that Byzantine art concentrates on discrete, conventional signifiers.[15] This also implies that there is not much concern for what we now take as portrait verisimilitude or realism – the idea that the portrait

13 Dumitrescu, "Quelques remarques," 42–45. 14 Spatharakis, *Portrait*, fig. 73.

15 H. Maguire, "Likeness and Definition," in *The Icons of their Bodies: Saints and Their Images in Byzantium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 5–47.

should resemble the person portrayed as closely as possible in as many different respects as possible.

The idea of the conventional, non-realistic nature of Byzantine art has been one of the staples of Byzantine art history in general, and of the study of its portraits in particular, for a long time. De Grüneisen gives voice to it in his early examination of Byzantine portraiture, which he finds sorely lacking in comparison with Roman portraiture.[16] Velmans, in her study of the topic decades later, states flatly that verisimilitude is simply not to be found amongst its exemplars.[17] This apparent lack of concern with natural appearances is one of the features that is now often taken to mark off Byzantine art as being so manifestly different to post-medieval art.

Yet, consider further the portrait on fol. 2r, the scene of the emperor with his courtiers. As Spatharakis notes, besides the hair and beard, the artist also attempted a more ambitious change to the face: the nose has been lengthened with a dark, heavy stroke on the right-hand side (see detail, Fig. 4.7). Both the awkwardness of the line and the resulting longer nose can be readily appreciated in comparison with the portrait appearing in the coronation on fol. 2bis-v (Fig. 4.6). Here, in this single stroke, lies a whole ideology. For in it we have a clear effort to go beyond the easy markers of tonsure, and to get to grips with a core aspect of facial physiognomy. Those involved with the rededication of the manuscript, it appears, do indeed have a sense of portrait likeness not that dissimilar to our own; they also feel the need to correlate the image to aspects of the face that they, as well as we, regard as significant.

Similarly, if we ignore for a moment the issue of the changes made, and consider the images of the emperor as they stand simply as portraits, all show an extraordinary sensitivity to the subtleties and nuances of what might be termed facial topography. The intense facial modeling and attention to contour demonstrate a close study of the features that constitute a face. Further, as Spatharakis demonstrates, these images also bear striking resemblances to other surviving portraits of Michael.[18] Granted, none of this proves conclusively that the portraits are absolutely accurate representations of the man himself, but it is difficult to shake the impression that a real attempt has been made to capture what both Byzantines and ourselves might consider to be a real likeness, beyond the stock vocabulary of signs with which Byzantine art is often assumed to operate. Spatharakis is, in a sense, right to label these portraits "Michael VII," despite the

[16] W. de Grüneisen, *Le portrait: traditions hellénistiques et influences orientales* (Rome: W. Modes, 1911), 97–99.

[17] Velmans, *Peinture*, 59–60, 65.

[18] Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 115–16.

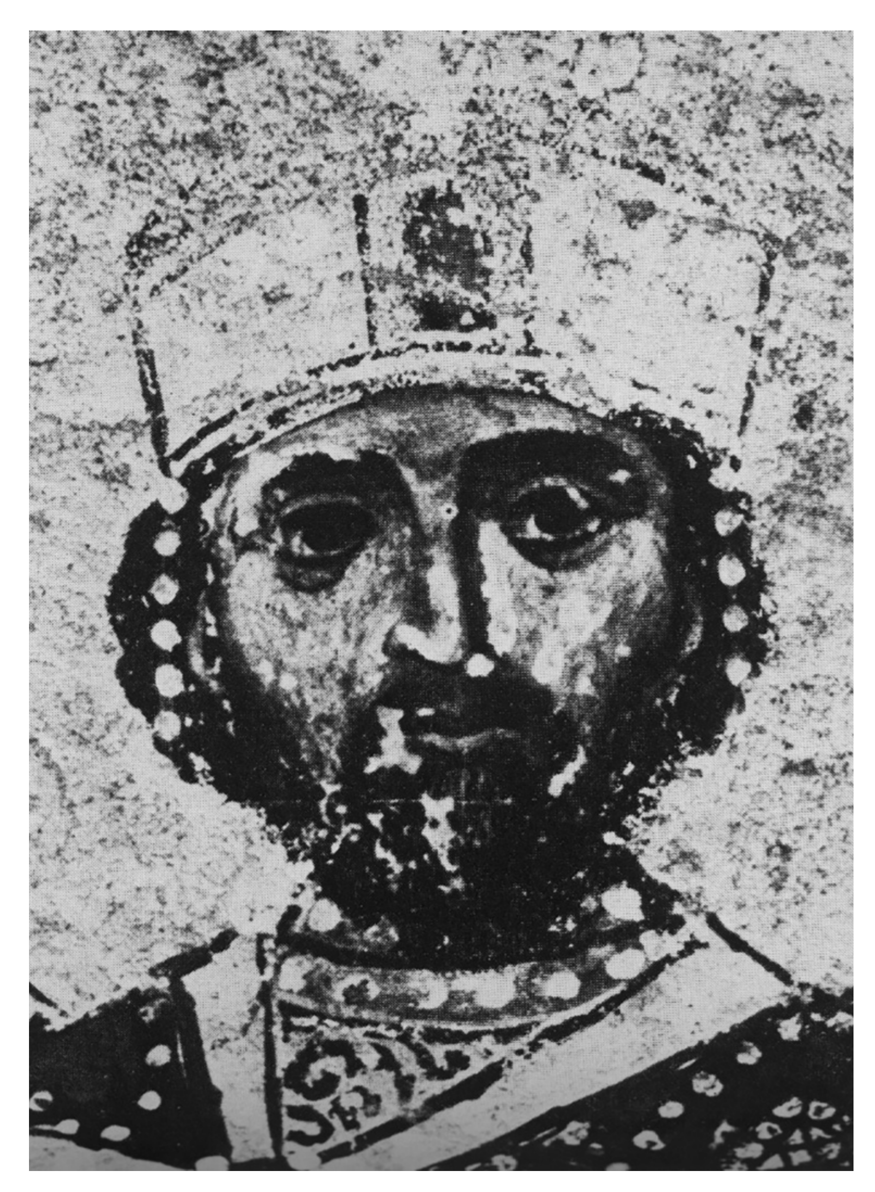


Figure 4.7: Head of emperor, detail, Fig. 4.4, emperor and courtiers, Homilies of John Chrysostom, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, Coislin 79, fol. 2r.

inscriptions to the contrary. Thus far, at least, the Byzantines really do seem to have read portrait similitude in ways not that different to ours.

Yet equally significant is the fact that it was only in this scene and not in any of the others that these changes were attempted. As Spatharakis says, "the alteration proved difficult for the artist, who abandoned any further

changes."[19] This means that the manuscript was dedicated to the new emperor with only the most superficial of changes being registered in most of the portraits.

This story, then, when taken in all its contradictory aspects, is extremely revealing. In the first place, we see a culture that cares enough about portrait similitude both to get it right the first time and to attempt to make changes in important areas in later alterations. Yet we also see a culture that, at a certain point, was prepared to forgo that degree of portrait resemblance. It is extraordinary to think both that the donor would imagine that the emperor would not notice that the picture did not look much like himself and that the emperor himself, who, after all, is probably the person most sensitive to his own appearance, would not be offended by this. If this is indeed the case, it can only be because something more important than personal resemblance is in play. And this "something more" must surely be a structural positioning, given in this case both by the broad context of the emperor's location at the head of Byzantine society (indicated in the images by any number of cues, from his costume to the deference shown him by all other figures in the scene) and the more narrow circumstantial designation that he occupies within the drama of gift exchange. In effect, the donor is assuming that the emperor will recognize himself more by his structural location within these criss-crossing paths of power than by his personal resemblance to his image.

This feature of structure trumping personal resemblance is surely the most fascinating aspect of the story, and more significant than the again undecidable question of who, exactly, the emperor is.[20] That a culture that manifestly does care about appearances can drop that concern, and dedicate a portrait to the most powerful man in the land on the basis of not much more than beard shape, must strike us as extraordinary, and should

[19] Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 116.

[20] In "The Patron's 'I'," Ivan Drpić considers in depth different modes of identity construction in operation in Byzantium, and argues that the model of singular individuality that we moderns assume to be at the core of identity does not hold for the earlier epoch. He finds there instead a sense of identity that is constructed relationally, in terms of specific roles that a person adopts in given situations. If we expand Drpić's terminology of "roles adopted" to "structures of interaction within which someone is inscribed," we find that the current case is entirely congruent with this conception. Drpić's overall approach to the question of the patron in this article is very similar to the one adopted in this book. He considers that person not from the point of view of a unique, historical individual who predetermines the meaning of the text in conformity with an already extant intention, but as someone whose identity is structured within, or emerges from, the text itself. Although the current study does not, in general, deal with the question of identity construction, it too considers the very subjectivity of the patron to be in process within the forge of the image itself.

give us pause. The fact that a culture can undo – place in abeyance – the link already in place between visual appearance and personal identity is astonishing. Yet it is here, at precisely this juncture, in the split between the initial effort to make a change and the fact that no further alterations were attempted, that we catch a glimpse of a visual culture so radically different to our own; more different, in this respect, than if they cared nothing for portrait resemblance at all.

* * *

Let us turn now to a study of the how the gift operates within a religious context. It should be noted at the outset that the gift as we have so far encountered it in our supplicant portraits is not quite the same one that we are familiar with in our usual, everyday modern experience. Conventionally, when gifts are given, perhaps for a special occasion such as a wedding, we do not accompany them with a request for a gift that we would like in return. We give the gift for the occasion, and we do it without planning on what we would like to get back. The Byzantine gift, by contrast, which requests something in return, looks much more like a kind of purchase than a gift in the strict sense of the term.

This question of the tricky relation of the gift to a purchase has been much debated within the area of sociology and anthropology known as social exchange theory, especially in the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, George Homans, and, particularly again, Bourdieu. As mentioned in the Introduction, a study of their chief concepts, set in relation to the specific characteristics of the human-to-divine gift as manifest within Byzantine Orthodoxy, can reveal much to us of the relationship at the heart of our contact portraits.

The two different senses of the gift just sketched above – one in which it is akin to a purchase, the other in which it requires no return – form the key investigation points of this chapter. The argument will be made that our Byzantine gifts function by threading their way between the two positions, in order to achieve their final, extraordinary effect.

The gift-as-purchase idea was most prominently theorized by George Homans, who asserted that social exchange is practiced principally for the profit that individuals derive from it. As he himself phrases it, his theory is one of "individual self-interest."[21] One gives a gift with the express hope of

[21] Homans first begins to develop his theory in a work co-authored with D. Schneider, *Marriage, Authority and Final Causes: A Study of Unilateral Cross-Cousin Marriage* (New York: Free Press, 1955). He presents a more complete version in *Social Behaviour: Its Elementary Forms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961).

a return. In making this argument, Homans was countering a giant of the field of social exchange, Claude Lévi-Strauss, who, in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, had insisted that no economic gain was to be had from social exchange. This absence of economic gain is caused by one of the key elements of such exchange, identified by Marcel Mauss, an early theorist of the process, as the obligation to return a gift.[22] For Lévi-Strauss this means that, much like people buying rounds of drinks for one another in a bar, one receives in value precisely what one has laid out, thanks to that function of reciprocity.[23] The purpose of such exchange, according to Lévi-Strauss, is that as goods pass between people, social networks and bonds are also created, cemented, and perpetuated. It is upon these bonds that all manner of social institutions can be built, and within which all transactions in society occur. Whilst the economic value of the exchange is negligible, the social value is immense.[24]

For Homans, however, the obligation of reciprocity that ensures that the drink is returned can be turned by someone to their own advantage. In a context other than similar-item exchange, if a specific object is desired, a gift may be offered, with that object being demanded in return. It is when operated in this manner that the gift can become a purchase.

At first sight, our standard Byzantine donor portraits appear to have more affinities with Homans's theories than Lévi-Strauss's. Indeed, they seem to be textbook illustrations of self-interested exchange. Acting upon a specific desire, a gift is proffered in the hope of obtaining a particular desired item in return. The comments of Lassus and Mundell-Mango make clear that they too see the gift in terms of its economic function: one pays the price one must in order to receive what one desires.

Yet, whilst the theory makes perfect sense when considering the secular, political world of the donation to the emperor that we see in ms. Coislin 79,

[22] M. Mauss, *The Gift*, trans. I. Cunnison (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1988), 37–41.

[23] C. Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. J. Bell and J. von Sturmer (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969 [1949]), especially 138–39. For some of the pioneering anthropological texts in gift exchange, see J. G. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament*, 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1919), vol. II, 94–371; B. Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London: Routledge, 1926). On social exchange in general see K. Gergen, M. Greenberg, and R. Willis (eds.), *Social Exchange: Advances in Theory and Research* (New York: Plenum, 1980). The most detailed and extensive thinking-through of these theories in relation to human-to-human exchange in Byzantine art is contained in Hillsdale, *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy*, with explicit discussions of the theory on pp. 3–22, 152–53, and 338–43.

[24] "In the sphere of culture, the individual always receives more than he gives, and gives more than he receives": Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures*, 7. This aspect of social bonds being forged through exchange is a major focus of the studies mentioned in the Introduction dealing with Byzantine diplomatic gifts. See p. 14.

it runs into some strange anomalies with respect to gifts to spiritual figures. As Mundell-Mango mentions, the Byzantine court was indeed susceptible to bribery, and special favors could be "bought" with lavish gifts, but the idea of a gift as a form of purchase for what is desired sits uncomfortably within Christianity.[25] The idea that salvation should have to be "bought" or "paid for," or indeed, Mundell-Mango's suggestion that holy figures could be "bribed," surely runs contrary to the altruistic love, charity, and grace that form the basic tenets of the faith. It must be highly doubtful that the donors themselves were really thinking of their gifts as bribes or purchases.

A further difficulty arises in relation to Homans's focus on the individual motivations driving the exchange forward. According to his theory, everything hinges on two principles: personal benefit derived from the relationship; and symmetry, or reciprocity. An agent receives something, derives some advantage from it or is pleased with it, and then gives something of value in return. The partner must be provided with a personal benefit or pleasure in exchange for that which has been received. Conversely, if an agent would like something from another partner, she or he must first supply the other person with a pleasing object or service in order to invoke the principle of reciprocity.

Within the context of Christianity, however, the principles of mutual personal benefit on which self-interested exchange is based break down. Whilst it is clear how humans would be advantaged by gifts from God, the manner in which the reverse might take place is not certain at all. Most obviously, the all-powerful Christ, the perfect, complete being, having total mastery over all, including humans, can scarcely be said to profit from their gifts. More than this, however, in relation to Christ and all the other holy figures and saints, their response to these gifts would necessarily seem to be of a rather different sort to the personal kind under which Homans characterizes exchange as operating. Crucial to the whole ethos of these figures are the qualities of selflessness and altruism, with saints of course epitomizing these ideals.[26] They are specifically not susceptible to pleasures of the sort we have labeled "personal," which under this regime must be

[25] The use of the term "Christianity" here and over the next few pages is not meant to imply a conception of the faith as monolithic and invariant. It is only to attempt to distinguish some of its key features in respect of exchange from other religions, notably Greco-Roman paganism, where the notion of gift exchange is broadly spread.

[26] See P. Brown, *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), especially 213–338 on the Eastern Empire. See also S. Hackel (ed.), *The Byzantine Saint* (London: Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius, 1981), especially the chapters by H. Chadwick, "Pachomios and the Idea of Sanctity," 11–24; H. Druvers, "Hellenistic and Oriental Origins," 25–42; and R. Browning, "The 'Low Level' Saint's Life in the Early Byzantine World," 117–27.

construed as pertaining to the world of earthly vanities. To think of saints as being pleased at receiving gifts in the way in which people usually are seems almost self-contradictory. It would sound odd, for example, to declare that a saint were pleased at a new church for reasons of personal acquisition or greater fame, although reasons of this sort would seem quite appropriate, for example, to the Byzantine emperor in ms. Coislin 79.

For religious donations, then, such as constitute the majority of cases we have been investigating, the absence in one of the parties of this personal benefit, which is usually taken to be the key factor and motivation for the exchange mechanism, is highly significant, for the system has been knocked off balance. It is no longer one of reciprocity. To focus on Christ for a moment, salvation and redemption are still forthcoming, even though he himself can receive nothing in return. Thus what he has to give is given in absolute altruism and generosity, the most extreme sort imaginable. And this point is of crucial importance for Christianity. The fundamental promise made by Christ, "Believe, and you will be saved," can be seen to be formulated precisely against the idea that humans should have to benefit the deity in order to receive redemption. To quote Meyendorff, "Neither the eucharist nor the work of Christ in general can be reduced to a juridical notion of sacrifice conceived as exchange. God does not have to receive anything from us."[27]

Within Christianity, then, Christ's vow means that belief and a following of the Christian injunctions are all that is required for salvation, nothing more. In contrast to the vast majority of everyday exchanges (and even religious ones pertaining to other religions, for example in the world of Greco-Roman paganism, where capricious gods must be constantly propitiated), one does not have to benefit the partner in the interaction to obtain his or her favor. The ultimate desideratum, salvation, is offered as a true gift, for free. All one has to do is believe, and act piously. This is sufficient to obtain the most valuable prize of all, one which moreover has been constituted in the present context as truly priceless. It is in this context that we find Meyendorff referring to Baptism as a "free gift," a gift offering the extraordinary possibility of redemption.[28] By definition, it cannot be returned, yet is given anyway, out of pure love, generosity, and altruism. We may say, then, that Christianity understands extraordinarily well the difference between the selfless, non-motivated gift and the interested gift that the portraits and their inscriptions seem to invoke. Perplexingly, however the selfless gift seems to render that interested gift unnecessary.

[27] Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 40–41. [28] Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 193.

But this analysis can also be taken even further. For not only does Christianity invert the usual norms of reciprocity, it actually seems to subvert that principle itself. The very possibility of reciprocity has been removed, as we have seen, by the lack of susceptibility of the holy figures to the sort of benefit that reciprocity demands. The whole basis of bi-directional exchange has been undermined. The relationship operates within the exchange system, but is not in any sense exchange.

We are thus left with a paradox. Gift exchange is not necessary to elicit salvation, nor could the principle on which it operates even apply, yet churches were constructed and books donated with the express intention of achieving salvation. Within the terms of strict exchange theory as developed so far, we cannot explain how the gifts might have been operating.

A partial solution to this paradox is provided by an area in which Christianity is not quite so revolutionary, but works rather within standard social structures. In that one of the parties to the transaction stands in authority over another, Christianity operates within a system of relationships of power. Here we return to Homans, who, in a further development of his theory, attempted to account for power relationships themselves as products of systems of exchange – specifically, those in which exchange is unequal. He states that "Power ... depends on the ability to provide rewards that are valuable because they are scarce."[29] Blau, a follower of Homans, expanded this idea, saying that when one agent's gifts are of a lesser value than those she or he receives, that person makes up for the difference in value with respect, honor, and acknowledgment of power.[30]

Christianity here would seem to be the most extreme case possible of such unequal exchange. Christ offers the most desirable gift of all, one that no return-gift could possibly match: everlasting life and salvation. Adherents then respond with the piety, belief, and following of commandments that are the central features of the Christian faith. We see the visual effects of this clearly in our supplicant portraits, where people constantly make a display of diminishing themselves in relation to the holy figures they confront. In size, in body position and posture, there is a perpetual restatement of the awareness of the power imbalance between mortal and divine.

Yet, although unequal exchange is clearly a primary factor in constituting these power relationships, the following section will contend that

[29] G. Homans, "Fundamental Social Processes," in N. Smelser (ed.), *Sociology. An Introduction* (New York: Wiley, 1967), 27–78, at 55.

[30] P. Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (New York: Wiley, 1964).

attitudes of piety, respect, and honor play a rather more complex role in gift exchange than allowed by Homans and Blau. In order to investigate this further, we turn again to Bourdieu, who likewise considers the roles that "intangible" attitudes such as friendship and honor play within exchange. Bourdieu's comments on gift exchange form part of his larger field of study concerning the distinction between theory and practice that we have already had occasion to study in some depth in the previous chapter.[31] These aspects, we will see, will be essential in our accounting of the Byzantine gift.

* * *

The Bourdieu argument that we will avail ourselves of is itself based on the work of an earlier generation of scholars, and it relates to the debate mentioned earlier between Homans and Lévi-Strauss over the function of social exchange. One of the underlying disagreements in that debate concerned the relationship of individuals to society and vice versa. Lévi-Strauss, to whose theory Homans's is a response, was, as one of the founding fathers of the structuralist movement, interested in the larger patterns of behavior – the social formations and structures that underpin societies – not in the individuals (and their motivations) that populate those formations. Lévi-Strauss's disinterest in individuals and his understanding of how they operate in relation to society is perhaps best indicated by a phrase in his book *Mythologiques*, dedicated to the analysis of myths. There, he declares: "We are not, therefore claiming to show how people think myths, but rather how myths think themselves through people, without those people knowing it."[32] It is against what Homans sees as the diminution or outright discarding of the individual as an explanatory factor that he develops his theory, as an attempt to re-insert the individual as causal of society.[33]

Bourdieu himself, as one of the leading figures of poststructuralism, shares with Lévi-Strauss an interest in deep structures in society as his primary goal of investigation. However, he does not share Lévi-Strauss's methodology of ignoring or rejecting the role of the individual. His interest is not in the individual per se as primal explanatory cause, as it is for Homans; however, he does contend that by taking into consideration

[31] For an interesting application of Bourdieu's theories to Byzantine aristocratic society, see Cutler, "Uses of Luxury."

[32] C. Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques I: le cru et le cuit* (Paris: Plon, 1964), 20. The book has been translated into English by J and D. Weightman as *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), see p. 12.

[33] For an excellent summary of the debate between Homans and Lévi-Strauss see P. Ekeh, *Social Exchange Theory: The Two Traditions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

individual beliefs and personal accounts of behavior, one may arrive at a better understanding of those deep structures. This is not because individuals have privileged insight into those structures, but rather because individual beliefs form part of the complex web through which those very structures are formed. In returning to the individual in his inquiry into social exchange, Bourdieu thus reinserts some of Homans's methods into the structuralist project. A detailed analysis of these two levels, the overall structuralist inquiry and the individual system of belief within that, will be of great importance in our understanding of the Byzantine gift.

In what is perhaps his major innovation in gift exchange theory, Bourdieu tackles the very concept of reciprocity, which neither Lévi-Strauss nor Homans, despite their disagreements, had really questioned. Reciprocity is, of course, the essential feature of gift exchange; without it, there would be no exchange behavior to speak of. The acceptance of the axiomatic nature of reciprocity in social exchange theory goes all the way back to Mauss, who, as we saw, simply identifies it as an obligation, one of the laws of exchange. Bourdieu, however, problematizes the relationship between reciprocity and the gift, precisely through recourse to the individual.

In his examination of social exchange, Bourdieu separates the analysis of the gift into two different components. The first of these concerns the way in which the practice appears to an outside observer. This would be the perspective adopted by Lévi-Strauss in his observation of the practice. From this viewpoint, it is evident that exchange takes place – a gift is given, and a counter-gift is offered. This situation appears with such regularity that reciprocity appears to be a social law – Mauss's obligation to return a gift mentioned above. However, in his major contribution to social exchange theory, Bourdieu turns his attention to the perceptions of the individuals involved in the transactions. There, he finds that gifts are frequently regarded by those giving them as individual acts of generosity, not necessarily called for by a previous gift, or made with a return gift in mind. (Our example of a wedding gift at the beginning of this chapter is an instance of this.) What an outside observer will see as a "reversible" process – that is, gifts being returned in response to a previous one – does not appear that way to the givers; to the agents involved, the process is irreversible, each gift appearing to its donor to be an independent, inaugural act.

Bourdieu thus argues that in order to understand social exchange and its relation to the gift, it is necessary to differentiate between the "objective" truth of gifts, which is that they must be returned (it is this aspect that the

outside observer sees), and the "subjective" truth experienced by the agents, which is that gifts are given generously, without calculation, and without expecting anything in return. Each of these levels coexist to form "the full truth of the gift."[34]

Yet, what happens concerning the gap that thus opens up between these two different levels of the gift? How is the subjective truth, in which there is no specific injunction to return a gift, transformed into the broader behavior, objectively observable, that every gift is, in fact, returned? Here we return to the concept of misrecognition already discussed in some detail in the previous chapter. For Bourdieu, misrecognition is frequently present, as we saw, in the division between theory and practice. Gift giving, in this analysis, constitutes a practice, an activity that is carried on "beneath" theory, and which corresponds to the "objective" truth of the gift. Theory, here, is the mode through which the "subjective" truth of the activity is carried within the individual awareness of the agents themselves. As is always the case in this divergence between theory and practice, everybody within the society in fact "knows" of the objective truth that gifts must be returned, yet this truth is also misrecognized, and thus society members are not conscious of it.

This misrecognized compulsion to return, however, also enables the specific behavior that Homans seizes upon in his theory to exist. Since the giver "knows" that a return gift will be forthcoming, an initial gift can be given precisely in order to *provoke* the counter-gift. That initial gift is thus not a disinterested, spontaneous act requiring no return, as it appears to its giver to be; it is, rather, inevitably both "forced and interested."[35]

This misrecognition is aided by a particular mechanism often active in relation to the gift: the return gift must not be given immediately upon receipt of the initial gift. A delay is thus enforced between gift and counter-gift (as might be the case with wedding gifts, for example), enabling agents to misrecognize the fact that gifts must, indeed, be returned. Agents can therefore pretend, to each other and themselves, that there is no necessity to return the gift, and its giving can be experienced as a generous, non-calculated action. "If the system is to work, the agents must not be entirely unaware of the truth of their exchanges . . . while at the same time they must refuse to know and above all to recognize it."[36]

The "system" that Bourdieu refers to here, and for the sake of which this elaborate process of misrecognition is in place, is primarily that of commercial and economic exchange, to which we earlier referred. But this is

[34] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 5–9. [35] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 6. [36] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 6.

also the world of calculation and self-interest, concepts frequently frowned upon and regarded in a highly negative light within circumstances that are not overtly commercial (as, for example, with family or friendship bonds etc.). Such activities can therefore only be carried out with the aid of collective and individual misrecognition. This allows agents to engage in interested and forced exchange, whilst pretending that they are acting only in ways approved by the group, involving generosity and altruism. All self-interest is denied.[37]

It is this objective level of dishonorable exchange (which everybody engages in) that is exposed by an immediate return of the gift, and which is consequently looked upon with great disapproval by society, anxious to maintain the deception, and hence the honor of the group. As Bourdieu says, the gift is a "fake circulation of fake coin," a primary element of social alchemy.[38]

The process of hidden economic exchange taking place below the surface of the gift is called by Bourdieu the good-faith system, because it depends for its maintenance on the idea that all agents truly are acting in the spirit of altruism that they declare for themselves. However, underpinning each act of good faith is a collective bad faith, which misrecognizes the true nature of the relationship contracted. Each partner must constantly create, participate in, and believe in the illusion that the relationship is just what it seems to be. Good faith, then, is a misrecognition, a collective act of deceit that enables "appearances" to be maintained whilst the true business of exchange happens underneath.[39]

Bourdieu thus provides a complex theorization of the manner in which some forms of economic exchange are managed under cover of the gift. In doing this, he pays particular attention to the surface form of gift exchange, and the way in which it is differentiated for its practitioners from overt economic behavior. In undisguised economic exchange, such as monetary purchase and barter, the interest of each party is openly acknowledged, each stating what they desire from the transaction. This is diametrically opposed to the manner in which agents experience gift giving, in which, as we have said, even the possibility of returning a gift must be ignored. This subjective experience thus allows the gift, in essence, to operate as a disguise for economic transactions.[40]

[37] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 171–80, 194–95. [38] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 6, 192.

[39] Bourdieu, *Outline*, 171–83, especially 173–75.

[40] For an application of Bourdieu's notions of gift giving to the history of the ancient world see R. Gordon, "The Real and the Imaginary: Production and Religion in the Graeco-Roman World," *Art History* 2 (1979): 5–34, at 24, and S. Price, *Rituals and Power* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 74. Hillsdale, in *Byzantine Art and Diplomacy*, 339–43, makes use of Bourdieu's concept of misrecognition in her study of Byzantine diplomatic gifts.

In relation to our donor portraits, this complex theory will be of much use, although, as with the previous chapter, some further analysis is required before we uncover the relevant structures within which we see the gift operating. At the outset, Bourdieu's conceptions would appear to have little connection to our subject matter, both secular and religious, since nothing within them is disguised. As we saw, no attempt is made to hide the fact that something is desired in return for the gift. The level of self-interest involved in the initial gift is blatant. Yet, this said, Bourdieu also teaches the value of paying attention to the overt beliefs of individuals involved in the interactions, and with that in mind, let us also reconsider for a moment the concepts of honor and respect that we earlier saw Blau utilizing. It will be recalled that in his theory of unequal exchange, those concepts make up for the gap between gifts of greater and lesser value.

The general principle in operation, as Blau articulates it, is that of equal value of exchange; the larger the value gap between gifts given and received, the greater the compensatory power, respect, and acknowledgment of submission. The inherent supposition is that of a linear equation. Inferior gifts plus intangible respect equals great gifts. Respect is effectively regarded as a commodity, not unlike money or an item of barter, which can be given or withheld, as the case demands.[41]

However, there is an objection to be brought against Blau's construal of these intangibles. As soon as we pay attention to the account that people themselves give of their actions we find that agents engaged in actions of this sort do not perceive the respect and obedience offered or received as being an item of exchange. These features, rather, seem to stand outside that framework. As soon as honor and piety are mentioned, we enter a different world, one where exchange, payments, and value fade from relevance. Instead, we are in an area of activity and response that involves a whole social code of behavior distinct from the one that the Homans–Blau model implicitly assumes.

The Homans–Blau model is essentially an economic one, based on a system of voluntary exchange. Working on the analogy of the marketplace, where the greater the demand and the stronger the desire for an item, the more someone will pay for it, the entire stress is placed on the desired end, the agents doing whatever is necessary to obtain it. When applied to the sphere of religion, offerings in the church or temple thus come to be seen as parallels to pay in the marketplace, as the means to the all-important end.

[41] For further discussion of this position, see M. Deutsch and R. Krauss, *Theories in Social Psychology* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), 114–15.

This highly reductive economic model, however, misses out on several crucial features that are usually in play within systems of power and respect, whether religious or secular. Most importantly, one cannot simply assume a parallel between an object desired within an economic context and something desired within a power and respect context. In the economic sphere, wants occur within a framework that already determines that they can be fulfilled by barter, trade, or pay. Within respect and power relationships, however, where the power holders – the gods or kings – are from the outset defined as having a monopoly upon the distribution of whichever items the believer or subject may desire, the means by which those items may be obtained are entirely different. The same system that specifies that particular wants can be satisfied only by the gods or potentates also sets up an ideology, creating a framework of actions and attitudes that governs the entire relationship between those in authority and those who are ruled. This we may call the social constitution, and it is in fact a whole worldview, inculcated into all members of the society, rulers and ruled alike, in myriad ways that can be not only explicit, but implicit and extremely subtle as well. The social constitution is learnt by people in the process of learning the structure of their societies, and their place within it. It forms part of the "given" of social existence. In Bourdieu's phrase, it is part of the "habitus," things that people "know," in that they act upon them and respond to them, and which inform all their perceptions, but which are not necessarily conscious.[42] And it is here that we find the conditions under which the items in question may be distributed.

To focus on religion for a moment, this social constitution, which states that gods distribute particular items, also teaches that gods must be respected *simply because they are gods*. And it also teaches that gods who are respected provide bounty. Much the same goes for all figures of authority in varying degrees. Power must be deferred to, not *in order* to achieve a desired end, but simply because that is the nature of power: it automatically calls forth respect. And when this is done, favor is forthcoming.

This specific mode of interaction within power relationships is highly significant, because it seems to indicate an alternative to the iron law of exchange. In contrast to the Homans–Blau model, people within the power relationship do not perceive of piety, respect, and honor as operating

[42] Bourdieu, *Outline*, especially 72–95 and 172–97. Note especially 87: "schemes are able to pass from practice to practice without going through discourse," and "the apprentice insensibly and unconsciously acquires the principles of the . . . art of living, including those not known to the producer of the practices or works imitated."

within a system of exchange. In fact, they do not see the power relationship as being an exchange relationship at all. When something is requested from a superior, agents approach with respect and honor. Yet this is not done in "payment" or exchange. Rather, it is done because agents are automatically obeying the inculcated, implicit rules of society. It is part of what is involved in understanding the term and concept "superior," and is behavior appropriate to one's status as ruled. The correct, necessary way of dealing with authority is to show respect, and this is done without further consideration.

Similarly, those in authority do not grant favor because they feel they have been paid, or in exchange. Rather, in conformity with the social constitution that they share with their underlings, they grant it to those who have acted in a particular way, one that has been predefined by that constitution as being the appropriate manner for those to whom they can distribute their bounty. Potentates regard this as being part of their "brief" of being in authority; it is a constituent element of their post, not to engage in exchange, but simply to dispense those things of which they are in control to those who act in the manner that they automatically consider to be the correct one.

The sequence of action and response, then, seems to be one that is not dependent on the mechanism of reciprocity. Rather, it is driven by machinery embedded within the social matrix of the power relation itself, known and shared by ruler and ruled alike. Potentates distribute not on the principle of exchange, but when other, socially specified independent conditions have been met.

Yet precisely because there is no perception of exchange amongst agents themselves, this forms another perfect disguise mechanism for reciprocal economic exchange, similar to that described by Bourdieu. An outsider will observe an exchange in process, with items being given and returned, yet this will not be recognized as such by the agents involved. This becomes clear when we see how easily gifts can be fitted into the system.

Owing to the distinctive property of gifts, which Bourdieu highlights, of appearing to be motivated solely by concern and consideration for the person for whom they are intended, they can, under the description of the power relation, now appear to be nothing but concrete instances of the respect and esteem in which the donor quite properly holds the potentate. Since they are taken to be no more and no less than symptomatic of the respect that the system regards as appropriate, and respect itself is not regarded as being an item of exchange or purchase, gifts can be given, potentates can respond with favors, and yet to neither party does it appear

as though they are engaging in exchange or purchase. To both parties, the gift will appear as nothing other than the correct functioning of the honor-due power system, one to which the notion of exchange is entirely alien. The whole system, in short, functions as an extraordinarily efficient and subtle disguise mechanism.

The idea that gifts, when given as symptoms of honor and respect, are not perceived of as items of exchange has been noted by anthropologists; for example, Radin states: "In its highest ideological form, an offering *loses its character as an object with a definite exchange value, and becomes a sacrifice, a gift*".[43] Spencer too observes the phenomenon, but then dismisses it by saying that in cases like this "the idea of exchange is nominally, but not actually, excluded."[44] Yet neither goes on to derive any further conclusions from their insight. Spencer, in particular, we can see, is caught between the two levels of the gift as described by Bourdieu. On the one hand, he is aware of the subjective truth, which is that the gift is not perceived as being an item of exchange; yet, as an outside observer, he notices that it is, indeed, always given within the context of a return. Bourdieu, however, allows us to theorize the two aspects of exchange and apparent non-exchange in relation to each other.

In addition, then, to the mechanism of gift disguise by delay, we should include the entire structure of the power relationship, with its prescriptions of correct attitudes and behaviors for both parties involved. Yet, similar though they are in this respect, there is a further immense difference between them that is of great import for us in our consideration of Byzantine contact portraits, relating to the questions of causality and influence that we broached at the end of the preceding chapter.

Bourdieu's reading of delay disguise is developed in the context of almost equal exchanges, often involving friendship or near-acquaintanceship. He does not really deal with power relationships as far as gifts are concerned. Let us call his system the friendship disguise. The power disguise, as the name implies, is concerned with gifts in the context of power imbalances. In both systems the gift sets itself up as being motivated solely by a concern for the recipient. In the friendship system, however, with its time delay, the aspect that is being disguised and denied is, effectively, the *causality* of the first gift upon the second. In this system the two gifts must appear to be unrelated to each other so that there can be no suspicion that the first gift has been given in order to elicit the second.

[43] P. Radin, *Primitive Religion: Its Nature and Origins* (New York: Viking Press, 1937), 178 (emphasis added).

[44] H. Spencer, *The Principles of Sociology*, 3 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1896), vol. II-3, 390–91.

What must be hidden, therefore, is the fact that the first agent desires something of the second.

None of this applies, however, in terms of power. First, the power relationship decrees that there are certain specified items to be dispensed by the authority, whether salvation, as in the case of our Byzantine religious donations, or a favorable attitude from the emperor, as in the Homilies of John Chrysostom seen earlier. This is explicit, and thus the fact that something is desired by the donor does not need to be hidden. It may therefore be said that power transforms desire, and renders it legitimate within the bounds of that particular relationship.

Related to this, but even more important in its implications, is that there is no need to hide the fact that a causal relation is in force between the first act and the return. This is so since it is already explicitly inscribed in the social constitution that people must behave in a particular manner in order to receive desired items from those in power. A form of causality between act and response, the selfsame feature denied and disguised in friendship, is thus already admitted.

The reason that causality can be admitted and is permissible in power, but not in friendship, is the nub of the matter. In friendship, as we have just said, to admit that there is causality is to admit that the first gift, the action that procures the return, is interested – that is, it is given solely out of a desire for the return. In power, however, this is not the case. For what causes the return, respect (of which the gift is but a marker), cannot by definition be interested. True respect itself cannot be motivated by the desire for a return. It cannot be calculated or interested.

What power does, then, is to interpose an intermediate transformative term (respect) within the causal chain of initial action (first gift) and response (return gift). By doing this, it renders the causal connection fully admissible. The system of respect has been constituted precisely so that of its very nature, all possibility of calculation and self-interest has been excluded.

When power functions properly, and it often does, it thus rewrites the gift relationship. Unlike the vast majority of cause–effect relationships, it provides an alternative form of action and response, and achieves an astonishing form of social distortion. Even though it is known that a given action will have a particular response, what motivates that initial action cannot, by definition, be the desire for the effect that is produced.

It is through the means of respect, then, that the disguise is achieved. By reconstituting the gift so that it fits perfectly into the honor system, the causality of the first gift is admitted, but it becomes simply an item of

respect, incapable of being interested, and to this a response is made, without it appearing to pass through the system of exchange.

* * *

This discussion of respect and power allows us to return to our images with new eyes. Let us begin by reexamining the donor pages of the Paris Homilies of John Chrysostom discussed earlier. One of the many distinctive features of these images concerns the lengths to which the donor has gone to abase himself, to show his heartfelt respect for the emperor in a multiplicity of ways. In fol. 2v, the scene in which the emperor appears on a footstool flanked by the Archangel Michael and John Chrysostom, hieratic scaling is taken to an extreme not equaled elsewhere in any extant Byzantine contact portrait. Diminishing himself to the point of near-invisibility, the donor is, as Cutler notes, dwarfed not only by the emperor, but by his footstool as well (see Fig. 4.2).[45] The inscriptions to the portraits, too, are lavish in their fawning. As we have seen, on fol. 2r the emperor is lauded with the words: "you hold the throne, shining as if luminescent, crowned with virtues in abundance."[46]

Yet, to stay with the scene of the emperor with Michael and John Chrysostom a moment longer, there is also considerably more here in terms of its elevation of the emperor than we have seen elsewhere. Restricting ourselves only to the figures of Chrysostom and the emperor, at first sight we should find their interaction to be typical of a true donor portrait; one figure turns and diffidently proffers a gift to another who is manifestly his superior. Yet the image is extraordinary when one takes into account the actual personalities involved. Here the power positions have been reversed from that of a standard donor portrait; usually it is the earthly figure who makes a gift to the holy figure, not vice versa.

A near-equivalent image that we have already looked at demonstrates how unusual this scene is. In the double-page illustration of the Vatican ms. gr. 666–Synodal 387, the emperor Alexios is also offered written works by Church Fathers (Figs. 1.7 and 1.8).[47] But here, rather than receiving them frontally, as the end and most elevated point of the transaction (as the emperor does in ms. Coislin 79), he rotates his body and passes the works on to God, appearing in the lunette above him. In this scene, Alexios is an honored figure – he stands tall on a suppedion, he does not bow his head – but he is also the middle-man, the commissioner of the gift that ultimately makes its way to a higher authority, God.

[45] Cutler, *Transfigurations*, 77. [46] Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 110–11.
[47] See Chapter 1, pp. 32–37.

The figure of Michael to the right of Nikephoros in fol. 2v of the Paris Homilies also behaves out of character. Customarily, when angels interact with emperors, it is not to beg for their favor. A comparison with the coronation scene in the Barberini Psalter also makes clear the unorthodox nature of the image. There, the angels answer only to the supreme being of the universe, who hovers in the upper region of the image, acting as the instrument of his will as they place crowns on the heads of the emperor and his family below (Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, Barb. gr. 372, fol. 5r, *c*. 1090–1100, Fig. 4.8).[48] In the Paris Homilies scene, by contrast, the angel now accedes to the emperor, respectfully bowing his head and raising his hands toward him in a gesture of supplication. Again, the power positions have been reversed.

Last, but not least, as Dumitrescu points out, the trio of Chrysostom, Michael, and the emperor also resembles a traditional Deesis grouping, with saints and holy figures interceding with Christ.[49] Yet, to place the emperor in the position usually occupied by Christ is without precedent. This is a remarkable claim to power being made here, and it certainly elevates the status of the emperor to previously unheard-of heights, even within a culture where he was conventionally associated with Christ.[50]

Before we criticize the emperor for his arrogance, however, let us bear in mind that this image was not one of his own choosing. This is a gift *to* him, commissioned and orchestrated by someone else – the tiny donor. This is an image not of self-aggrandizement, but of extreme flattery. The Archangel Michael and St John Chrysostom, as they supplicate the emperor, have been pressed into service by the donor. (For a small man, he has powerful friends!)

All of this adds up to a perfect illustration of the disguise mechanism in respect mode. The image constitutes an insistent repetition of the tropes of honor, reverence, and deference to authority. Within this context, a lavish manuscript of great expense is given, a return of favors is requested and will no doubt be granted; yet to neither emperor nor donor should the gift

[48] The exact identification of the emperors, as is often the case, was long disputed. The matter seems to have been settled for now by Anderson, who proposes that they are Alexios Komnenos, his wife Irene, and son John. See J. Anderson, "The Date and Purpose of the Barberini Psalter," *Cahiers archéologiques* 31 (1983): 35–67. For some of the earlier ascriptions, see E. De Wald, "The Comnenian Portraits in the Barberini Psalter," *Hesperia* 13 (1944): 78–86, and Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 26–36.

[49] Dumitrescu, "Quelques remarques," 41.

[50] As Maguire has shown, for all that the emperor enjoyed supreme status, there were always important distinctions observed between him and Christ, keeping him firmly in his place. This image breaks those conventions. See his "The Heavenly Court," 257–58.

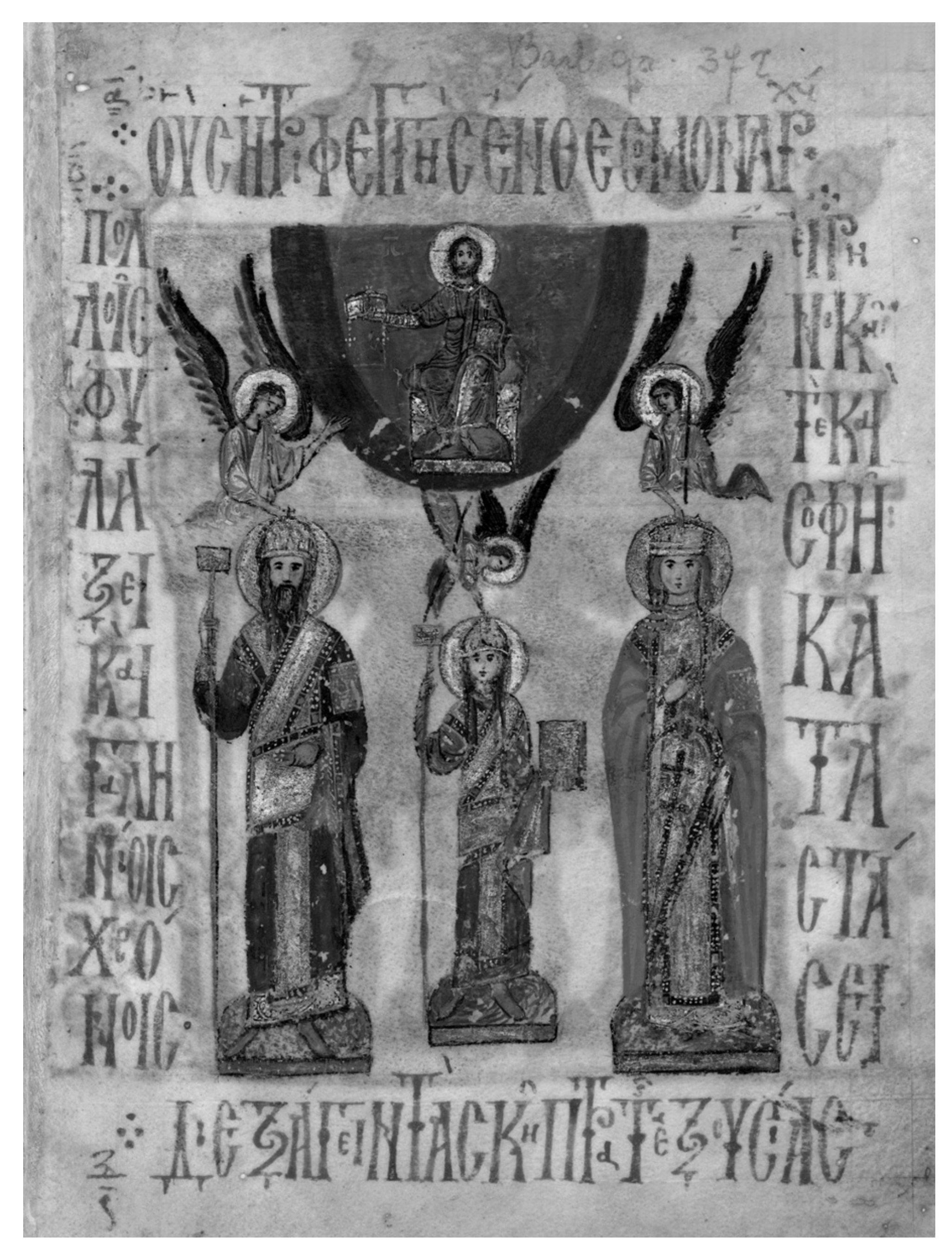


Figure 4.8: Imperial coronation, psalter, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vatican, Barb. gr. 372, fol. 5r, *c*. 1090–1100.

appear to be an exchange item, purchase, or bribe, since such great care has taken to bind the request for favor intimately to so many iterations of respect. Yet we may also say that the power relation is indeed functioning as a disguise, and that the interaction of expensive gift and return favors truly is one of exchange, misrecognized for the agents themselves through the alchemy of the power gift.

In our religious donor portraits as well, the power gift is clearly in full operation. The scenes are replete with petitioners forcing themselves into positions of humility and deference. Respect, worship, and awe are what drive Leo to his knees in his Bible (Fig. 0.2), even as his arms are simultaneously being pulled up by his desire to give his gift. From Theodore Metochites in the Kariye Camii to Basil in ms. Megale Panhagia 1 (Figs. 0.1 and 1.27), all the scenes emphasize the regime of respect under which the transactions between the figures take place. And in all, we now see how respect functions to turn agents away, deviate them, from any thoughts or awareness of exchange.

This analysis provides us with a partial solution to some of the problems we posed earlier. Previously we noted that the gifts within these scenes did not appear to be true gifts, but seemed closer to a form of purchase, barter, or bribe in that they were explicit in requesting something in return. This, however, we labeled incompatible with the fundamental precepts of Orthodoxy: one surely does not have to purchase salvation, or bribe one's way toward it. But we see now that the form of the power relation allows for gifts to be given with the explicit hope of achieving salvation, without this appearing to either party as a form of "purchase" or bribery. Even the explicit inscription of Basil, stating, "I offer you this masterpiece, requesting that you receive me in return," does not transform the gift into a purchase, as it would within a friendship system.[51] The "in return" does not necessarily imply that Basil is conceiving of his gift as an item of exchange. The phrase establishes a link (one that we will explore further shortly) between the gift and divine favor, but this link is not a purchase or bribe that trades on economic self-interest, despite initial appearances to the contrary. By the strange transformations of the power relation, the connection is one that does not appear to agents within the system as an exchange, because it is ensconced within the fabric of piety.[52]

[51] See above, pp. 179–80.

[52] This is an interesting case where an apparently clear verbal statement can be shown to have alternative possible readings. The idea that words do not always mean what they seem to say is discussed again in the following chapter.

Yet, if the power relationship lifts the gift out of the framework of exchange such that our donors will not experience their gifts as items of purchase or barter, what of the matter of disguise? What of the "objective" but disguised truth of real exchange that takes place, and for which the system of respect stands as obfuscating cover? Here, I contend that religion in general, and Byzantine Orthodoxy in particular, forms a special case, an exception, and that power is not, in fact, functioning to transfigure an economic exchange as it does in a lay system. Indeed, as we shall see, despite the presence of an action and a response that seems to constitute the absolute essence of the structure of exchange, in these cases there is no disguise, and equally, if strangely, there is no exchange. Instead, we will find an altogether different, extraordinary form of causality that sidesteps the entire question of exchange.

The point can be best illustrated again in a comparison between our secular example, the donor in the Paris Homilies and the religious donor portraits we are examining. In the Paris Homilies, as we have seen, the connection between the donor and the emperor may be characterized as an interested exchange relationship. Yet, since it is also disguised by the power relationship itself, neither party will think of it as an exchange. However, one of the features of such a relationship, as described by Bourdieu, is that the disguise may be stripped away to expose the intentional, exchange-oriented root of the relationship, and this may be easily seen in relation to the manuscript. As described earlier, disguise is dependent on the good-faith system overlaying one of bad faith. Good faith, in this circumstance, may be described as each of the agents "believing" (in Bourdieu's sense of misrecognized belief) in the truth of their emotions of respect and piety, both in themselves and in the other. However, because that good-faith system is but a cover for an underlying system of true exchange, the system is also open to bad-faith manipulation. In the case of the Paris Homilies, it is possible that the donor does not genuinely respect and honor the emperor in the way that someone who has fully internalized the social constitution regarding power has done. Yet, even though not feeling those sentiments in the way that he "should," he may hypocritically feign or simulate them, and still achieve the same result from the exchange relationship as if those feelings had been real.

However, by a curious but extremely important logical feature for the donors in our religious portraits, such cynical, bad-faith manipulation is impossible. It would make little sense to imagine one of our supplicants feigning a piety and love of God that they did not genuinely feel, simply in order to achieve redemption. If one believes in the

necessity of salvation, it is almost certain that one already believes in the power and glory of God, and honors and respects him on those grounds alone. Conversely, if one does not already believe that piety is owed to God, it is more than likely that one does not consider salvation necessary or desirable. For our donors, each part of the system stands and falls with all the others. No aspect of it can be voided without the rest of the framework collapsing. There is no room within this sequence for bad faith to operate. If the precepts of the system are not accepted, one has no need for what is on offer from that system, and probably does not believe that God can provide it anyway.

In sum then, our diminutive donor in the Paris Homilies of John Chrysostom who offers a manuscript to the emperor may or may not be sincere in his expressed feelings towards the emperor; this would depend on whether he has internalized correctly the notions propounded within society in general, and within educational systems in particular, that authorities must be loved and respected, and deserve loyalty. If he has, then the relationship depicted will not appear to him as one of economic exchange, even though that is, in effect, what it is. If he has not, then he is a cynic, and he thinks of his gift as a purchase.[53] But the donors in our religious portraits cannot perform such acts of bad faith. The mere fact of their presence within a religious scene makes it impossible.

The upshot of this discussion brings us to a critical point in our analysis of the religious gift. In this case, the system of respect and honor does not function as a disguise. This is not because the relationship between donor and recipient is revealed as being truly one of exchange, but, rather, the opposite: there is nothing to disguise. Stripping away the "cover" of respect and piety leaves not another mechanism of exchange operating beneath such that it could be hypocritically or cynically manipulated, but nothing at all. There is no other level operating "below" that is being disguised by the system "above." There is no disguise. There is no exchange. The relationship is nothing but what it seems; a system of honor and respect. When these are not present, there is no "system" left to speak of or describe. Respect is all that there is.

[53] The "cynic" is here being used as a device to indicate logical, not historical, possibility. It is unlikely that anyone within Byzantine society had not internalized those categories of unhesitating devotion to the emperor, although the emotions that this produced could occasionally waver. Support for a usurper, for example, would mean a transfer of loyalty to a new figure, and the corresponding demotion of the current holder of the crown to, perhaps, the status of "unworthy charlatan" within one's emotional hierarchy. Nonetheless, the general category of "emperor" was almost always likely to generate full respect and honor.

This point also provides a solution to the difficulties and inconsistencies involved with the idea of a true interested exchange relationship between the Byzantine donors and the spiritual figures who receive their gifts. As we saw, the spiritual recipients have already been defined out of the exchange relationship by their inability to be benefited in a way that true commercial reciprocity demands. Christ is so powerful as to be beyond the reach of any advantage that humans could offer, and saints and holy figures fall within the larger compass of selflessness and asceticism. One could not therefore account for the manner in which the spiritual figures within Byzantine Orthodoxy could be benefited in the way that the principles of reciprocity demand in order for a return to be made. It appeared then that the Byzantines were again engaging in paradoxical behavior, in that gifts were neither necessary nor even possible as bringers forth of salvation, yet donations were made anyway. We see now, however, that if the relationship is not one of commercial exchange, and the gifts are not operating as a cover or disguise, then the problem thus falls away. If the gifts are nothing other than that which their surface expression designates them as being, which is statements of concern, respect, and honor for the recipient, their giving makes perfect sense, and entails no contradictions. There is no place for an exchange mechanism in relation to salvation, whether overt or disguised.

There is one area, however, in which the religious donations and donor portraits do participate in a type of subterfuge. It is a commonplace of Byzantine studies that the heavenly court of Christ and the saints is conceived on the model of the temporal power system of the emperor and his courtiers. In this respect, the donor–deity relationship may be seen as a projection and reification of the temporal power system existent between the public and the emperor. There is, however, one major difference between them in relation to disguise and exchange. The religious relationship picks up the surface disguise of the power system, the level that declares that respect gifts are disinterested, and that benefactions are dependent not on exchange but on respect, and projects this into objective, independent existence. It presents as a functioning reality, as all there really is, a system that in its home territory is not all there really is. A new interaction is constructed where the disguise rewriting of a relationship becomes the real reality that can only falsely be claimed in the disguise. Gifts really do become items of respect only, and holy figures really do respond simply to respect, and nothing else. And they really do all of this because none of it can be questioned; it cannot be a disguise because, if it were, the whole system would collapse. Nothing would be left behind.

But having been projected as a reality, such that no doubt is possible, this reality can then also be retroactively projected back onto the earthly power-disguise system from which it is parasitically derived. Here it can function to legitimize and validate as real and unquestionable those very systems of disguise such as underlie the basis of imperial rule. A parallel is established such that the religious non-disguise non-exchange foists its truth value upon the (disguise) exchange of the secular interaction, further denying that any disguise is in place. The debt of the religious system to the conventional power-disguise system is thus repaid.[54]

* * *

If we have solved one of the major problems concerning the gift in relation to our donor portraits in that the gift giving is not something that might be called an exchange, a further key issue remains. So far, the majority of this chapter has been spent discussing the means and mechanisms by which gifts might exert an influence over the recipient to achieve a specific outcome – indeed, exchange is but one method to attempt to explain this question of the exertion of influence. However, if we have ruled out exchange for our donor portraits, the problem of the exertion of influence remains in relation to one of the major issues that we discussed in the previous chapter. It will be recalled that when first broaching the relation of gifts to other modes of sin loosing, we noted a distinction between the unilateral action of God in the activity of forgiving, propounded by Byzantine theory, and the causal effect of gifts. Further, in our discussion of the debates with the Latin West, we argued that one of the primary reasons for the Byzantine rejection of the idea of Purgatory, and the refusal to acknowledge the role of punishment within their own practice, concerned the issue of divine power. Punishment penalties, such as are found in Purgatory and *epitimia*, operate "mechanistically" – that is, they function on the sin or sinner only, and produce absolution without the intervention of a holy figure. Byzantine theory, however, which espoused the notion of divine, unilateral forgiveness of sins at death, takes up a position at the opposite end of the spectrum, admitting only the action of God in

[54] There is another area as well, where the same gifts between humans and spiritual figures do participate in subterfuge and dissembling. For as surely as the gifts were given to God, they were received by the institution of the Church itself, and its very human agents who controlled it in its temporal, material form. The donor portraits, in not showing the true material recipients, may thus be said to be operating a disguise, as transfers of considerable value took place between humans, given under the description of "gifts to God." Although much may be said in this respect, it is subsidiary to our initial problematic concerning the issue of whether the relationship between donor and divine recipient should itself be interpreted as a type of purchase or not.

forgiving sin. Byzantine theory thus reserves for the divine full power over the process of sin remission, and halts any usurpation or infringement of that power by procedures that bring about the same effect (remission), without involving the divine action that should be its sole producer.[55]

However, against this very notion of the unilateral stands the gift. From everything that we have seen concerning the specific mechanism of the ways in which gifts operate, it must be evident that if Byzantine theory is opposed to "automatic" procedures of sin loosing, then it must be even more implacably opposed to the gift. The coercive relationship, where the receipt of a gift attempts to oblige a favorable outcome of judgment runs entirely contrary to the Byzantine conception that resists any compulsion on God. Indeed, we may now define this as one of the key problems of our gifts themselves in relation to everything we have so far covered. How do gifts fit into the structure of divine power?

Somewhat paradoxically, even though disguise plays no role within the interaction between donor and holy recipient in our donor portraits, the power disguise does provide a solution to the problem. We have seen that one of the distinctive features of a power-disguise exchange relationship is the absence from the conscious awareness of the agents involved of any notion of exchange, reciprocity, or enforced return of a gift. From the perspective of the power holder, in this case God, the reason for this is that the very nature of power itself, in its "purest" form, is surely the absence of constraint, to as large a degree as is possible, upon the power holder. The more God might be compelled to dispense his grace by duties and obligations, and the less that such power can be exercised completely at will, the further he would be from his state of absolute mastery over the world. Indeed, much of the social constitution that determines behavior appropriate to power, such as the gestures of ingratiation, respect, piety, and deference can be seen as providing proof (in the form of acknowledgment) to both parties that God has absolute control over his people.

In this way, by its peculiar alchemy, the gift resolves the apparently insurmountable clash between the sinner's activity to elicit forgiveness by means of the gift and the unilateral exercise of authority in the form of an unprovoked granting of remission. In short, power gifts solve the seemingly intractable problem of causality infringing on the autonomy of power. They do this by making the gift appear to be non-coercive. The enveloping of the gift in the mantle of respect, as we saw earlier, prevents it from appearing to be the first step in a causal chain of exchange.

[55] See pp. 122–24 above.

In that it is a manifestation of piety, respect, and honor, it constitutes a declaration of submission to, and restatement of, the full power of the potentate over the giver. As an act of worship, the gift thus removes the appearance of any coercive compulsion.

Gifts thus play out, and resolve, the opposition between external causality on the one hand – the urge – and the full, unilateral exercise of divine power on the other. If "mechanistic" procedures such as punishment are unacceptable because they exclude divine functioning, then power gifts are fully acceptable because they do not threaten to undermine anything of divine autocracy. They are causal, in the sense that some initiative is being taken by the sinner, but this is perhaps best considered as a "soft" causality, one that does not appear as such because it allows for the full exercise of divine autocracy not dissimilar from that found in unilaterality. Gifts thus allow for some specific action to be taken, and yet for this not, in fact, to appear as a causality that infringes on divine autonomy: a causality that is not truly one. Furthermore, as will be clear, this entire process, rather than eroding the authority of the power holder, as "hard" causality would do, actually bolsters it. By addressing and reassuring those very features of independent autocracy that threaten to be undermined by forced causality, gifts constantly reinforce the notion of the absolute mastery of potentate over supplicant.

Donor portraits, then, participate actively in the alchemy of the gift in an entirely distinctive sense. The humility, the *proskynesis*, and deliberate exaggerations of size and scale are not simply run-of-the-mill restatements of the general precepts of the religion; nor are they only declaring that humans are insignificant creatures next to holy figures. Rather, they interact productively with the project of the power gift. For they are part of the mechanism whereby the gift is negated as an enforcer of a particular response and restated positively as a respect gift. Without the protestations of humility, subservience, and respect, the gift threatens to lose its status as a non-causality device, and to take on its usual social role as response enforcer. Only through the constant reiteration of the inequality of the power relation, as is done visually, is the denial of the destabilizing threat of causality effected, and the preservation of the power order achieved.

In those situations where a power gift functions as a disguise, then, it is a most elegant deceiver. When it is not a disguise, when it simply is what it appears to be, it still possesses the magician's skill to make vanish the

intractable problem of causality acting upon power. The good-faith religious system holds its own to the last.

* * *

With all the foregoing, let us now return to the themes we identified in Chapter 3 as being essential for an understanding of the portraits and the gift. The first, which we labeled as the overall field of operations, consists of the conflict between the harsh and benign views of the afterlife and of sin forgiveness. The second concerned the strategies and techniques by which sin loosing could be achieved. In connection with the first of these, we saw that the gift has relatively little to do with the particular character of Byzantine mercy, but is rather aligned conceptually on the punitive side of that conflict. When it comes to the technical mode of how the gift works, however, the situation is different. The key issue addressed by the gift, concerning the autonomy of God, is also one that surfaces clearly in the Byzantine position in relation to Purgatory, and is very much associated there with the benign view of God forgiving sins unilaterally. In this respect, the gift does bear a relation to the side of mercy too. We thus see that it has a foot in both camps of the large-scale conflict.

It is important to note, however, that the work of negotiating between contradictions that the gift carries out does not take place between the obvious candidates, the two sides of that conflict, as might be thought. The gift touches on both sides, but does not reconcile them – they remain separated by the function of misrecognition. If one of the components reconciled by the gift is the autonomy of God, the element with which it is reconciled is not the punitive view of God (which, in itself, is not in contradiction with the autonomy of God); rather, it is the profound desire of the supplicant to act causally to affect the outcome of his or her fate. That desire itself is rooted in the fear that is provoked by the punitive side, but it is the desire for causality, not the harsh side in and of itself, that is in play. The gift is the embodiment of that desire, and also its instrument – it is the device that it is hoped will effect change. It is this desire for causality, which lies at the heart of the gift, that comes into conflict with the autonomy of God. This is the work that the gift is called on to do, to reconcile that desire with that key aspect of Byzantine theology, to allow for them to coexist, and for neither to impinge on the other.

Equally, if the gift does not act directly with the harsh side of the conflict, nor does it do so on the benign side. The autonomy of God relates to the merciful view of God, but that relationship is also, in a sense, tangential.

Autonomy here is not, in and of itself, a benign, merciful feature. It relates to the theoretical position that the Byzantines adopt in the Purgatory debate not because it is inherently merciful, but because the theory of unilateral action, from which the position of mercy itself derives, is designed to safeguard the autonomy of God. In a sense, both the gift and the Byzantine theory of God's merciful, unilateral action protect an essential concept: the autonomy of God. The gift works in parallel with the theory in this one particular respect only, but does not, necessarily, share its benign aims.

The complexity of these indirect relationships allows us to appreciate the degree to which the gift is enmeshed within the large structures of the afterlife, yet still manages never fully to square up with the way in which those structures are aligned. The gift spans the entire scope of all the concerns made manifest, from the debates to the visions and more, but it is unlike anything else found there. Born of the afterlife, shaped by it, but sharing none of its methods, yet always flowing in between its structures, perhaps the best word for its mode of operation is interstitial. In sum, we may say that the gift *navigates* between component structures of the afterlife, but *negotiates* between its tributaries.

With this notion of its interstitial mode of navigation and negotiation – what it ties together, and what it does not, yet what it still touches on none the less – we have arrived, in substantial part at least, at the very meaning of the gift. We see also how that meaning lies both in its largely passive relation to the overall milieu of the afterlife within which it is implicated, and its profoundly active role in negotiating between concepts that are at loggerheads with each other. Deeply involved with a series of conflicts and problems, the gift performs a dynamic intervention within a contested landscape.

This intervention also allows for a new and specific kind of interaction to take place. What happens between Theodore Metochites and Christ, say, is a complex dance of squaring the circle, of two beings divided by a wall of opposites, the clash between human volition on the one side, and the unilateral, uncoercible activity of divinity on the other. Earlier we said that the whole image, its very form and structure, the differing scales, the body language, the accompanying inscriptions, are the means by which the desire of the donor to influence events is rendered acceptable to divinity. To this we may now add that the gift, in itself, performs that function too. In a sense, it damps down or even strips that forward drive of the donor, set in motion by fear and desire, of its urge to compel a result.

Within the image, then, the gift itself is something like a magic box, the site where that drive of the donor is transformed, leaving in place something much less coercive than when it started, something softer that will not clash with the autonomy of divinity. It is tempting to declare that the gift brings down that wall of opposites, but that is not the case. Rather, it permits the drive to pass through it in transmuted form, and thus allows for a communication across that wall that would not otherwise be possible. In keeping with that magic function, it is almost as though it leaves the donor in one form, but will arrive at the recipient in another.

This idea also gives us an indication of how we should, perhaps, be looking at such images. We moderns no doubt see the most important components of those scenes as being the figures themselves, with the gift playing a relatively minor role. Yet perhaps we should see the gift itself as carrying more visual weight than we are inclined to attribute to it today.

If the gift allows for (or, indeed, produces) this particular kind of relation by providing a solution to difficulties that would otherwise have kept the protagonists apart, those protagonists face yet another barrier, more unforgiving still: the one that exists between the natural and the supernatural. How the donor portrait deals with this barrier forms the subject of investigation of our next chapter.

5 The Literal, the Symbolic, and the Contact Portrait: On Belief in the Interaction between Human and Divine

One of the peculiarities of the contact portrait is that it shows a scene that is literally impossible. The coming together of holy and lay figures, in the way that it is represented, is plainly a fiction. This is even more true of the donor portrait than of the non-donation scene, in that the representation of the donation itself adds a further, additional layer of impossibility. The key question this chapter seeks to address is how this impossible interaction between the spiritual and physical worlds should be understood. What might the particular character of the belief in such an interaction be? In the following, we begin by examining two options found within the literature attempting to account for it. Although neither is fully satisfactory, we will propose an alternative reading that builds upon elements of each, to arrive at an understanding of that belief as structured through the agency of the images themselves. In the course of our investigation, we will also consider in some detail the Byzantine discussions over the nature of belief in icons and the eucharist, which, it will be argued, is related to the belief in the interaction shown in the portraits. All these topics will be considered from the perspective of theories of symbolization and symbol functioning provided by Gerhard Ladner, Roman Jakobson, and Nelson Goodman.

The first option is that the scenes refer, in one way or another, to an event taking place in the real world. Spatharakis, in a section of the conclusion of *The Portrait in Byzantine Illuminated Manuscripts* entitled "Manuscripts as Gifts and for Private Use," raises the issue that we discussed earlier of donation versus non-donation iconographies. He concludes that those images showing a donor offering his book to the holy figure were placed in manuscripts that were, in fact, given as a gift to a Church institution; manuscripts with images that show the supplicant not bearing any gift, he maintains, were not given away, but were retained for private use.[1] Spatharakis is thus effectively making the claim that the

[1] Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 243–45.

donation shown in the image refers to an actual, physical donation that took place in reality. We will discuss this hypothesis in detail shortly.

A related form of direct reference between representation and reality, this time in connection with Church ceremony, has also been discussed occasionally; we have already seen one instance of this in Chapter 2 concerning Grabar's idea that the emperor in *proskynesis* mosaic in the Church of Hagia Sophia was a depiction of the emperor's ceremonial entrance into the church.[2] Grabar also made a similar claim in connection with the Justinian and Theodora panels in the Church of San Vitale in Ravenna (Figs. 1.28 and 5.1). Those scenes, he argued, depict an imperial offertory, the Apokombion, the emperors presenting their gifts as a means of honoring Christ, as described by Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos in the *Book of Ceremonies*.[3] This claim provoked a lively debate between Grabar himself and George Stričević, and also drew a later response from Thomas Mathews. This debate is instructive for showing both the complexities and the pitfalls of what we might term the "realist" argument, so let us begin there.

Responding to Grabar's contention, Stričević asserted that the offering depicted corresponded not just to the imperial offertory, but to the actual participation of the emperors in the celebration of the eucharist, specifically the Great Entrance. He argued against Grabar's interpretation on the grounds that the passages referred to in the *Book of Ceremonies* state that the emperors do not carry their own gifts, but that they are brought in by others for them.[4] To this Grabar responded by saying that even if the royal couple did not hold the gifts in the procession themselves, "this way of representing the offering is symbolic."[5] He then attacked the idea of the Great Entrance, using the argument that this part of the liturgy did not yet exist in the age of Justinian.[6] Stričević replied by saying that there was nothing symbolic about the scenes at all, and that they are very much representations of a definite ceremony. That ceremony, he went on to

[2] See above Chapter 2, p. 79.

[3] Grabar, *L'empereur*, 106–07. The ceremony itself is described by Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos in *The Book of Ceremonies*, 1,1, p. 18.

[4] G. Stričević, "Iconografia dei mosaice imperiali a San Vitale," *Felix Ravenna* 80 (1959): 5–27, at 6–9. It will be clear that the dispute thus concerns an almost identical set of issues as we saw in relation to the emperor in *proskynesis* scene. As noted, Mango and Oikonomides argued that the scene could not be a representation of the imperial ceremony, since the emperor is depicted with his crown, which he would not have been wearing during that ceremony. See C. Mango in Kähler and Mango, *Hagia Sophia*, 54, and Oikonomides, "Leo VI," 156.

[5] A. Grabar, "Quel est le sens de l'offrande de Justinien et de Théodora sur les mosaïques de Saint-Vitale?" *Felix Ravenna* 81 (1960): 63–77, at 65.

[6] Grabar, "L'Offrande," 66.

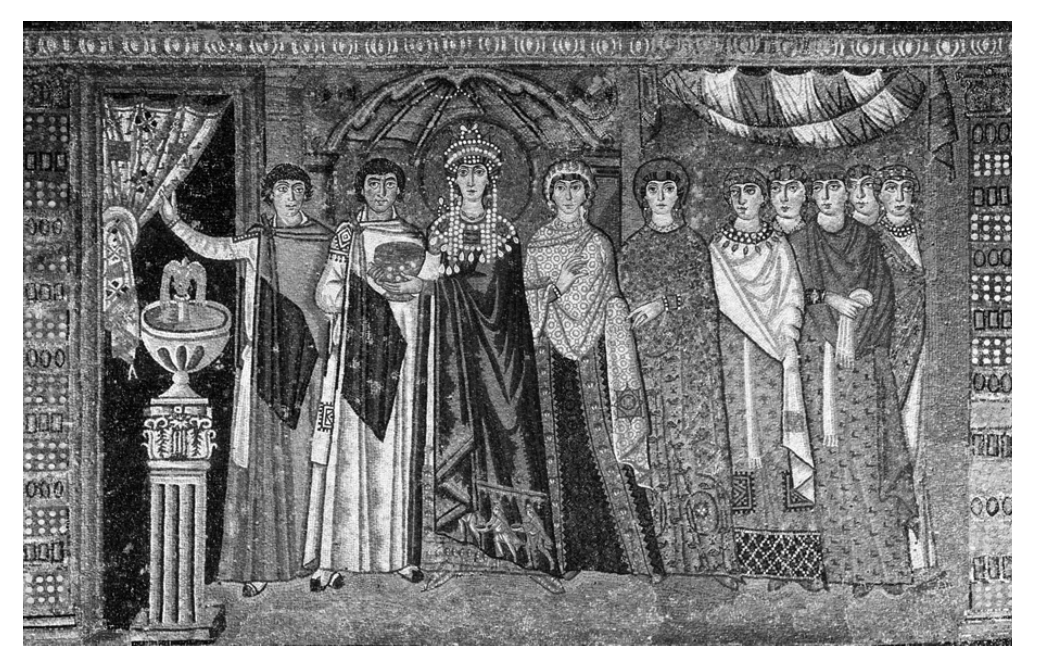


Figure 5.1: Empress Theodora and entourage, mosaic in apse, Church of San Vitale, Ravenna, consecrated 548.

argue, concerns the entry of the eucharistic gifts, which, even if not part of the Great Entrance itself, belongs to the "pre-history" of the Great Entrance.[7]

Finally, Mathews added his voice to the discussion, saying that in fact the representation could not be that of the Great Entrance, but corresponded far more closely to the events of the Little Entrance. During the Great Entrance there was neither bishop nor book nor cross, as is shown in the panels, and the carrying of gifts is by the deacon exclusively, whereas all these features are present in the Little Entrance. The only problem, however, is that, strictly speaking, the imperial couple should not be wearing their crowns during this ceremony; but this is to be seen as an attribute, included by the artist "as part of the ordinary identification" of the royal personages.[8]

Perhaps what is most revealing about this debate is how each author manipulates not the "facts," but the conceptual framework within which each works, in order to prove his own point. Grabar's first reading is notable for the fact that he takes the picture essentially on its own terms.

[7] G. Stričević, "Sur le problème de l'iconographie des mosaïques imperiales de Saint-Vitale," *Felix Ravenna* 85 (1962): 80–100, at 95–98.

[8] T. Mathews, *The Early Churches of Constantinople* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971), 146–47. For further discussion of the possible relations of the panels to other historical events, see Andreescu-Treadgold and Treadgold, "Procopius and the Imperial Panels of S. Vitale."

He knows that emperors made donations in churches, and this is exactly what he sees. He leaves the relationship between the art and the ceremonies that occurred essentially loose. But Stričević, perhaps unnoticed by Grabar, shifts the debate onto a more strictly referential ground, by ascribing greater denotational detail to more specific features in the painting. As long as Grabar was able to point to the fact that a ceremony occurred, and the panels were related to it in only a broad, general sense, contradictions were minimal. Under the new referential framework introduced by Stričević, however, Grabar is left somewhat lamely having to defend himself by claiming that those features not tied down in a specific representational sense in his first reading are merely "symbolic." But in moving down the path by introducing this form of referentiality, Stričević has raised the stakes of the whole debate. Soon he too would be subjected to exactly the same criticism that he had just applied to Grabar. For, in picking up several points of specific coincidence between the images and the written descriptions of ritual, he had changed the mode of reading of the entire scene. Rather than taking the scene as one in which no one pictorial feature is tied to any specific referent in the actual ceremony, one must now read the scene to look for coincidence.

Yet, in looking for this type of direct representationality, one also necessarily leaves open the possibility that there are other, additional, pictorial features that could be found and construed as individual signifying elements, but that are contradicted by the account that has been provided. And Mathews in turn pursues this twist in the spiral even further, seeing additional correlations between pictures and ceremony, but not the contradictions he allows. In the end, he too has to cover his tracks by saying that other features that his own, new system construes as non-representational – the crowns – are effectively, "symbolic." Through the course of the whole debate, then, symbols are progressively tightened against representationality, and then what remains as surplus value in terms of non-representation is called again, contradictorily, "symbolic."

Each of these authors, then, is reading the panels in a "realist," representational mode. Each is convinced from the outset that what is shown is essentially something that took place in reality, and the main issue is the degree to which the representation coincides with or departs from "what happened." The problem, however, is that "realism" is a sliding term that has purchase at any level of description. This can be clearly seen if we "translate" the panels into verbal propositions in terms of the three readings so far provided. For Grabar we would have "The panels are

a representation of a ceremony in which emperors give gifts to the church." For Stričević, "A representation of a specific ceremony, the prehistory of the Great Entrance, in which emperors carry their own gifts in procession." And for Mathews, "A representation of a specific ceremony, the Little Entrance, in which emperors carry their own gifts, and which features a bishop, a Bible, and a cross." This shows clearly how each picks up more features than the last that are construed as bearers of "realist," representational meaning, even though each is, on its own terms, still a "realist" reading.

It is, of course, both the disaster and the delight of the visual that it admits of such differing modes of reading. But it is also owing to the shifting nature of "realism," the fact that each of the above "transcriptions" reveals a "realism" of one sort or another, that the empirical aims of Grabar, Stričević, and Mathews, in their attempts to discover which ceremony is represented, are, in all likelihood, futile. Their debate is really about the mixture in the panels of the representational (in terms of correspondence to a ceremony) and the symbolic (items that do not correspond to the specifics of a ceremony). For the assignation of a particular ceremony to the scenes is dependent on which items are representational and which not. If one wishes to discover which ceremony it is, one needs to know what level of this mixture was instituted by the makers of the scene. In order to be able to "read" it (in this very specific sense), one needs to know what mode it was "written" in. Each author is effectively making a claim about that "writing" mode. Yet, as there is no criterion provided by the scene itself by which to judge just what this mixture is (why, for example, should the crowns be symbolic for Mathews, but the cross not?) these are hardly claims that can be made with any certainty or conviction.

Moreover, once one has pushed the realism this far, it is not clear where the process stops. Stričević, we have seen, is convinced that this is a non-symbolic, "realistic" representation. If so, where exactly is the scene taking place? It cannot be Ravenna, because neither emperor ever visited there. Does this mean, then, that all other features of the work are "realistic," but that geographical location is again, arbitrarily, "symbolic"? Undefined, untheorized realism, then, sets one off on a slippery slope, chasing questions to which there are no real answers, and forcing one into specious defenses (the symbolic) in order to extricate oneself from the inevitably resulting bind.

Similar problems arise in connection with Spatharakis's linking of manuscript donation scenes to the actual donation of the manuscript itself to a church or Church institution. Spatharakis does make an attempt to prove this contention, and it is worth dwelling on his proof in some detail because it raises in stark terms all the issues that should be examined.

In order to confirm his point, Spatharakis needs to establish, independently of the iconography, whether the manuscripts in question were in fact donations or not. Taking the examples of his survey, he finds that donation-type portraits are frequently accompanied by the word "give" in one of its many forms. In a liturgical Typicon in the Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos (ms. 1199) of 1346, a donor appears offering a book to St Eugenius (fol. 315v), and the colophon of the manuscript states that the volume was donated to a monastery.[9] In four other manuscripts, he notes that the term "offer" or "giver" is used in the inscription: Vat. Reg. gr. 1, fol. 2v, προσφέρων (Fig. 0.2); Melbourne 710–5, fol. 1v, δοτήρ (Fig. 1.15); an eleventh-century Lectionary in the Speer Library, Princeton, cod. acc. no. 11.21.1900, fol. 1*r, προσφέρω;[10] and a Gospel book of 1354 in British Library, London, Add. 39626, fol. 292v, "I offer" (in Slavonic).[11]

From the occurrence of these words, Spatharakis concludes that all these manuscripts were in fact offered as gifts to religious institutions. By comparison, he states, of the non-donation portraits, only one, that of the Lectionary Megale Panhagia 1 (Fig. 1.27), contains the word "give," προσενέ[γ]κω, which means that it was "certainly offered."[12] He finds that none of the other non-donation images have words of this sort, and so concludes that the manuscripts in which they occur were all kept privately by their owners. It should be noted, however, that the portrait in ms. Lavra A 103 also represents the supplicant empty-handed and in *proskynesis* (Fig. 1.14), yet the inscription reads "he has donated (προσῆξε) this to my church."[13]

9 Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 206–07. For the manuscript see Eustratiades, *Catalogue of the Greek Manuscripts*, 202. For an illustration of and comment on the donor portrait see H. Belting, *Das illuminierte Buch*, 32–35.

10 Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 74–76. For the Lectionary, see G. Vikan (ed.), *Illuminated Greek Manuscripts from American Collections: An Exhibition in Honor of Kurt Weitzmann* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), catalogue no. 26.

11 Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 89–90. For the manuscript, see *British Museum Catalogue of Additions to the Manuscripts, 1916–1920* (London: British Museum, 1933), vol. XX, 99, and C. Walter, "The Portrait of Jakov of Serres in Londin [*sic*], Additional 39626," *Zograf* 7 (1977): 65–72; Z. Gavrilović, "The Gospels of Jakov of Serres (London, B. L. Add. 39626), the Family of Branković and the Monastery of St. Paul, Mount Athos," in R. Cormack and E. Jeffreys (eds.), *Through the Looking Glass: Byzantium through British Eyes* (Aldershot: Variorum, 2000), 135–44.

12 Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 244.

13 Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 78.

A notable feature of Spatharakis's proof is the way in which he presumes that the words of the inscriptions are more reliable in informing us of "what happened" than are the images that they accompany: an inscription containing the word "give" is taken to prove that the book was in fact given, whereas a donation portrait by itself is thought not to provide definitive proof of this sort.

In order to investigate this, let us begin by quoting the inscriptions in question in somewhat greater detail than Spatharakis does as he presents his argument. As we have seen, the Vatopedi Typicon contains a colophon stating that the book was given to the monastery,[14] and the inscription of the portrait of Lectionary Lavra A 103 has Mary interceding with Christ for the supplicant with the words "He has given this [book] to my church."[15] The inscription of the Leo page of the Leo Bible (Vat. Reg. gr. 1) reads, "Leo . . . presenting the Hexekontobiblos to the Most Holy Theotokos."[16] The Speer Lectionary inscription says, "for with devotion I offer to thee [Christ] these ten books."[17] The portrait of the British Museum Gospel book Add. 39626 says, "I offer this to thee [Christ]."[18] The Megale Panhagia Lectionary states: "I offer you this masterpiece, requesting that you receive me in return."[19] And the monk in the Melbourne Gospels simply qualifies himself as the "giver" in his inscription: "O Queen of all, as mother of the Divine Word, the giver and writer of the book and painter of the pictures in it is your servant the consecrated Theophanes."[20]

Let us further subdivide these inscriptions into those that state that a book has been given to a church and those that state that a book has been given to a holy figure. Of these, the ones stating that the manuscript was given to a church can safely be taken as proving that the manuscripts were in fact given. The situation of the others, however, is less clear. Spatharakis himself has no hesitations whatsoever in assuming that the phrase "I offer to you, Virgin, this book" proves that the book was in actual fact, given to a Church institution. He assumes a simple correspondence: the mere occurrence of the word "give" or "offer," irrespective of its context, he takes as proof positive that an actual donation occurred.

[14] Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 207. The colophon is in Slavonic.

[15] Προσῆξε τῷ ναῷ τόδε: Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 78.

[16] Λέων . . . προσφέρων την ἐξακοντάβιβλο τήν ὑπεραγίαν θεοτόκον: Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 9.

[17] Προσφέρω σοι τά[ς] δεκαβίβλους: Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 75.

[18] In Slavonic. Walter, "Jakov of Serres," 65, n. 5.

[19] See above Chapter 4, note 2. Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 58.

[20] Δοτήρ κατ᾽ αὐτό καί γραφεύς τῆς πυξίδος καί τῶν κατ᾽ αὐτήν ἐργάτης ποικιλμάτων σός ναζιραῖος οἰκέτης Θεοφ[ά]νης: Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 76–77.

Now this is logocentricity of a kind that an art historian must question.[21] For the inscriptions using the locution "I have given to you, holy figure, this book" is no more and no less informative of what "really happened" than the pictures that show the donor presenting the book, in that neither is literally true. No one actually, physically, gave a book to the Virgin, as the picture represents, and as the inscription states. Owing to the non-literal quality (which we might therefore label loosely "symbolic," a point to which we shall return shortly), neither can be taken as telling us what happened, in a way that the statement "this book was given to a church" might do.

In sum, then, there are only two inscriptions that state unambiguously that the manuscript was given to a church, and of these, one contains a donation scene (the Vatopedi Typicon), and one a non-donation scene (Lectionary Lavra A 103). All the other inscriptions that Spatharakis counts on simply in virtue of containing the word "give" are inconclusive – as inconclusive as the pictures. One cannot assume that the inscriptions provide more information of what happened to the manuscript than the pictures, nor can we take as proven the assertion that the donation iconography corresponds to an actual gift of a manuscript.

Rather than presuming that the donation images are operating in so narrow a mode of empirical reference, then, it would be better to interpret them in a broader sense. Even in those cases where the manuscript was given, it is as much (if not more) the whole activity of commissioning a manuscript that constitutes the donation. It is interesting in this respect to note that the question posed by Spatharakis in relation to the iconography of the scenes does not apply in the same way to donor portraits appearing in buildings. Here, the question of actually handing the object over does not arise. Again, it is the fact of the building of the church itself that must count as the donation. We must, then, propose a broad and flexible reference for these images. A donation portrait in a manuscript may refer inclusively to the act of commission, and an actual donation to an institution if one occurred, or it might just as easily refer only to the act of commission if the manuscript were retained for private use. Similarly, a non-donation portrait might refer to the act of supplication entailed in the commissioning and donation of a manuscript, if the latter occurred. And both donation and non-donation portraits occurring in buildings, although iconographically almost identical with those appearing in

[21] The issue of words vs. images is discussed in greater detail below. See note 27 for further references.

manuscripts, would refer only to the building and commissioning of the structures.

The dual donor portrait appearing in the mid-fourteenth century Typicon of the Convent of Our Lady of Certain Hope demonstrates the necessity of such a flexible approach. In this image, the convent's founder, Theodule, offers to the Virgin a model of a church, whilst her daughter Euphrosyne offers a manuscript (Bodleian Library, Oxford, Lincoln College gr. 35, fols. 10v and 11r, Figs. 5.2 and 5.3).[22] Here the selfsame gesture of donation may be read in both its symbolic and literal sense.

Yet this broader reading of the donation images, although it does away with the rigid, one-for-one reference of the realist hypothesis, still poses certain problems in relation to other questions of reference. Whether it is an actual donation or just the commission that is being referred to by these scenes, this is not what is actually represented. To depict the act referred to would be to show the paying of a scribe, or the placing of the book in a monastic library, or, indeed, the actual construction of a church. Rather, these images represent what the referent act (the commission or the donation) itself refers to. The act of commission or donation is itself seen as a giving to the holy figure, and it is this which is represented in the donor portraits.

Yet if these images represent not what they refer to, but the referent of their referent act, what they actually depict, a physical interaction between human and divine, is of course, literally impossible. The pictures are representing literally something that is itself inherently symbolic. In this respect, the "realist" issue of whether reference is to some event in the real world or not fades from relevance, and a rather different series of questions present themselves: What is the status of belief in the impossible interaction that is depicted in these images? What does it mean to declare, as donor portraits are effectively doing, that to build a church or commission a book is to give it to God? And in what sense can one believe that one can give a gift to a holy figure, or that the holy being can actually receive it? It is to these questions that the rest of this chapter will be addressed.

On the one hand, it might be claimed that the images are "merely symbolic," that they show a figurative commentary, a metaphor of what the act of commission or donation is like. Yet the manner in which donor portraits represent something that is "symbolic" is not necessarily any different, in respect of their referents, from other kinds of religious

[22] On this manuscript see Spatharakis, *Portrait*, 190–206. See also I. Hutter, "Die Geschichte des Lincoln College Typikons," *Jahrbuch Der Österreichischen Byzantinischen Gesellschaft* 45 (1995): 79–114.

symbols. And the trouble with the idea of the "just symbolic" is that if applied to other religious symbols and ceremonies it results in a phantom, fictional religion. A clear example of this is the issue of the real presence in the eucharist. In that bread and wine are physically, literally, bread and wine, the extent to which they are anything else as well is a product of symbolic functioning. Yet by the conventional criterion of literalness, this would mean that the eucharist is body and blood "only symbolically," not "really." To a believer however, this is manifestly not the case. The eucharist really is the body and blood, not just a figure of speech. In this case, then, the distinction between the literal and the symbolic begins to break down. Similarly, although an icon is literally just paint and wood, it is not "just" a symbol of the person it represents. The being depicted has a real, literal presence in the picture.

The symbolic in religion, then, has a substantially different sense, function, and belief status than it usually has in the mundane, ordinary world. The distinctive feature of the religious symbol is that it is not just symbolically related to its referent, but actually becomes merged with that referent. It is believed to become its referent in a very non-symbolic sense. The relation is no longer one of aspectual similarity, but ontological identity. Given the entire religious context, in which the symbolic is liable to become transformed into something much more than the "merely symbolic," it is plausible, rather, to assume that the act of donating a book or constructing a church really was believed, in a literal sense, to be a giving to God. Indeed, at an intuitive level, one would imagine that the ultimate purpose and power of donations is that they are considered to be gifts directly to God or the saints. The pictures themselves, which are often at pains to emphasize the physical reality of the holy figures in relation to the donors, seem to imply that the belief is in a real, literal giving. On this interpretation, the scene would be something like a truthful representation of a state of belief. Let us call this the "realist-belief" position, to distinguish it from the "realist" hypothesis seen above, which sees a causal link between real-world events and the iconography of the donor portrait, and it forms our second hypothesis concerning that iconography.

The realist-belief position, however, very quickly raises questions of its own, specifically in relation to some of the inscriptions that we have already had occasion to look at above. On the one hand, fully compatible with that position are the inscriptions seen earlier, of the portraits of the Leo Bible (Vat. Reg. gr. 1, Fig. 0.2) and the Speer Library Lectionary (cod. 11.21.1900), which read "Leo . . . offering his bible to the Theotokos," and "O Christ . . . with devotion, I offer to Thee these ten books."

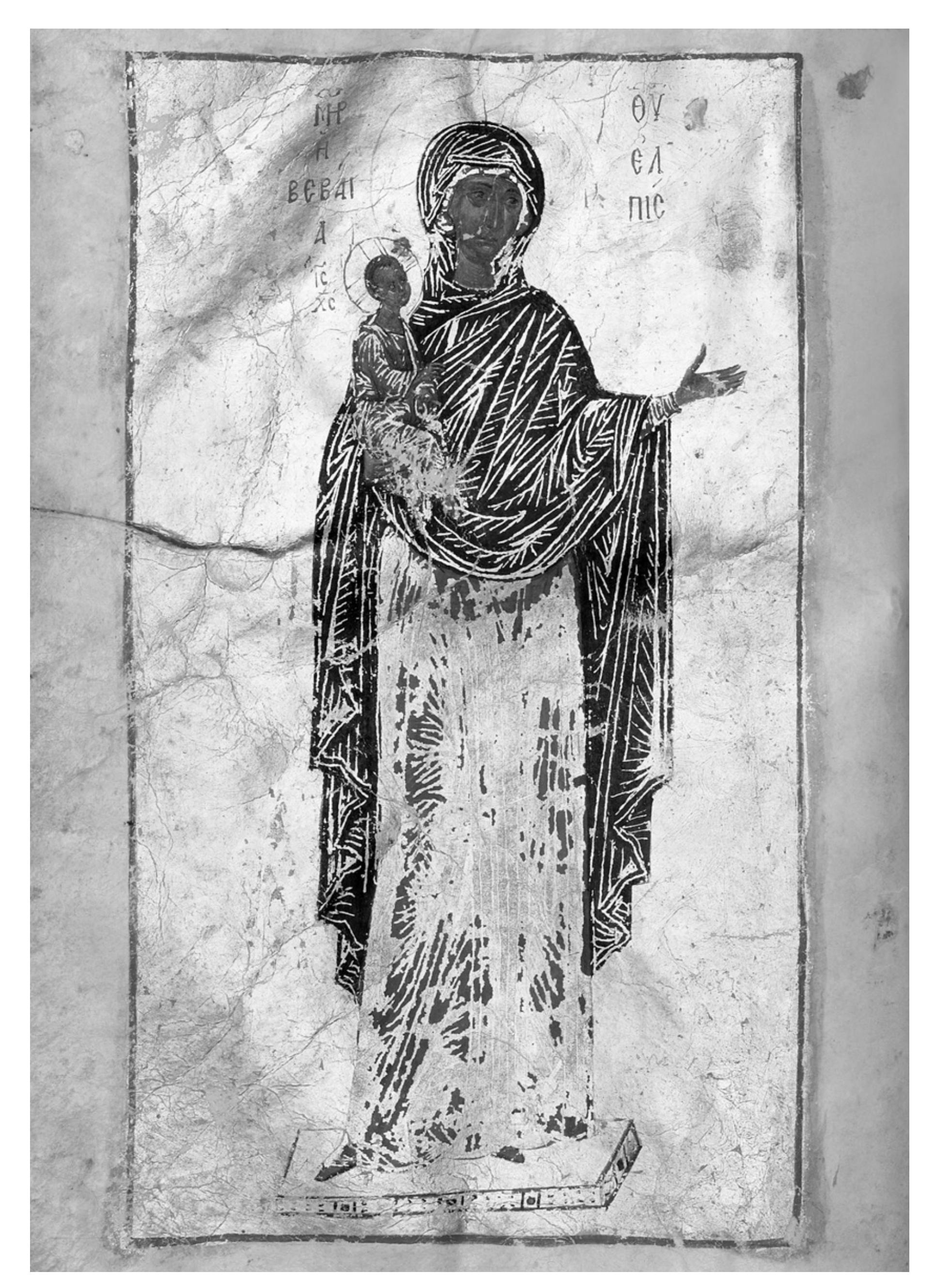


Figure 5.2: Virgin and Child, Typicon of the Convent of Our Lady of Certain Hope, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Lincoln College gr. 35, fol. 10v, fourteenth century.



Figure 5.3: Theodule and Euphrosyne, Typicon of the Convent of Our Lady of Certain Hope, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Lincoln College gr. 35, fol. 11r, fourteenth century.

In a sense, inscriptions of this sort seem to express the essence of what the realist-belief view takes donor portraits, and gifts, to be. They seem to state explicitly and unambiguously that the Byzantine donor believes that he is actually giving the books to Christ.

On the basis of this presupposition, then, we would expect the majority of donor inscriptions to take the form "I have given the book to you, holy figure." However, this is not the case, and it indicates something of the complexity of the field of belief that we are attempting to account for. Indeed, inscriptions of this sort are few and far between. This applies not only to those encountered along with donor images, but also to the many that occur in buildings and manuscript colophons that have no such images at all. Below are two typical examples; the first is from Church of the Holy Cross of Ayiasmati, Platanistasa in Cyprus, 1466. The second is from a Gospel book, ms. 56, in the National Library of Athens, of the tenth century.

1) This divine and most venerable church of the Holy Cross of Ayiasmati was erected from the foundations through the contribution, great desire, labour, and at the expense of the most pious chief priest lord Peter son of Perates and his wife. And those who behold this pray for them through the Lord, Amen.[23]
2) This venerable and divine Book of Gospels contains a total of thirty-six quartos, not counting the fly-leaves and those glued to the boards. It was donated to the church of the monastery of the All Holy Mother of God at Scutari by the monk John, the Syncellus who became Protospatharios and Protonotarios of the Drome. May God, who is good and philanthropic grant him admittance to His Kingdom and preserve those who piously and faithfully read what is written, Amen.[24]

What is most striking about these particular inscriptions in both books and buildings alike is how resolutely practical and literal they are,

[23] Ἀνοικοδομήθη [ἐκ βάθρων ὁ θείος οὗτος κ(αί) πάνσεπτος ναός Τιμίου Στ(αυ)ροῦ του Ἀγιασμάτι διά σ[υ]νδρομῆς κ(αί) πολλοῦ πόθου κόπου κ(αί) ἐξόδου του θεοσεβε(στάτου) ἱερέως κυροῦ πέτρου τοῦ περάτ[η] καί τῆς σ[υ]μβίου αὐτοῦ καί οἱ θε[ω]ροῦντες αὐτῷ διά τόν κ(ύριον) μακαρίσατε [ἀμήν]: Stylianou and Stylianou, "Donors and Dedicatory Inscriptions," 110–11. On dedicatory epigrams in general, see Drpić, "The Patron's 'I'."

[24] Αὕτ[η] ἡ σεβάσμια καί θεία βίβλο(ς) τ(ῶν) εὐαγγελί(ων) ἕξ τετράδ(ας) τ(άς) πάσ(ας) ἕξ κ(αί) τριάκοντ(α) χ(ω)ρίς τ(ῶν) π(αρα)φύλλ(ων) κ(αί) τ(ῶν) ἐν τ(οῖς) ξύλ(οις) κεκολλημ(ένων) ἀνετέθη (τῷ) να(ῷ) δέ τ(ης) μο(νῆς) τ(ῆς) Ὑπεραγίας Θ(εοτό)κου τ(οῦ) Σκουτ(α)ρ(ίου) π(αρά) τ(οῦ) (μον)αχοῦ κ(υρο)ῦ Ιωάνν(ου) καί συγκέλλ(ου) τ(οῦ) γεγονότο(ς) (πρωτοσπα)θα(ρίου) καί (πρωτο)νοτ(α)ρίου τ(οῦ) δρό(μου). ὅν ἀξιώσειε (τῆς) βασιλεί(ας) αὑτ(οῦ) ὁ Θ(εό)ς κ(αί) τ(ούς) εὐλαβ(ῶς) κ(αί) πιστ(ῶς) ἐντυγχάνοντ(ας) τ(οῖς) γεγραμμέν(οις) σώσει ὡς ἀγαθ(ῶς) κ(αί) φιλάν(θρωπ)ος ἀμήν: A. Mavra-Chatzinicolaou and C. Toufexi-Paschou, *Catalogue of the Illuminated Byzantine Manuscripts of the National Library of Greece*, 2 vols. (Athens: Publications Bureau of the Academy of Athens, 1978–85), vol. I, 18.

notwithstanding the fervor and piety of the language that is used. Churches are not "given to the Virgin," as we might expect, considering the evidence of donor portraits, but they are simply "built from the foundations." Books are not donated to holy figures; instead, they are simply given to monasteries and churches. Often we are told that these acts have been made possible through a monetary donation by the patrons or founders, and occasionally lists of donors are provided, with the exact amounts of money each has contributed, as in the following inscription from the Church of the Anargyroi Kosmas and Damian, Kipoula, Laconia in Greece, from 1265:

> This most venerable church of the Anargyroi Saints Cosmos and Damian, and their mother Theodote was built and painted through the toils, and at the expense of the priest Ioras and his son Elias, lector and nomikos, and his wife Maria, the priest Eustratios and his brother Ioras, and his wife K . . ., Tromarchis and his wife Thallo and children, and Pantoleos, his wife Maria and children. Of these, Pappa-Stratis gave one nomisma, Tromarchis and Pantoleos, one nomisma and a half, and the nomikos eight nomismata . . .
>
> It was finished by my hand, Nikolaos, painter, from the village of Retzitza, with my brother and pupil, Theodoros.[25]

Although we are left in no doubt as to the donors' religious conviction, and the fact that they are seeking salvation, when it comes to a telling of what their pious act consists of, this is seldom described as a donation to the holy figure. Rather, we are told literally what has happened in terms of the physical, empirically recognizable world. We do occasionally find an inscription which states that "this church

[25] Ἀν[οι]κοδομήθη κ[αί] ἀνιστορήθη ὁ πάνσεπτος *ναός* τ(ῶν) Ἁγίων Ἀναργ[ύ]ρων Κοσμά κ(αί) Δαμιανοῦ κ(αί) τῆς μητρό(ς) αὐτῶν Θεοδότης [ύ]πέρ μόχθου κ[αί] ἐξόδου Ἰῶρα ἱερέως κ(αί) υἱοῦ Ἠλ[ί]α ἀναγν[ώ]στου κ[αί] *νομικοῦ* κ[αί] τ[ῆς] συμβίου αὐτοῦ Μαρίας, Ευστρατίου ἱερέως μετά τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ Ἰῶρα μέ τόν συμβίο αὐτοῦ Κ . . . .., Τρομάρχι ἅμα (σ)υμβί(ο) αὐτοῦ Θαλοῦς καί τό *τέκνον* αὐτοῦ, Παντολέου καί τῆς συμβίου αὐτοῦ Μαρίας κ(αί) τό *τέκνον* αὐτοῦ. ἀπό αὐτά ἔδωκ(εν) ὁ πα(πά) Στρατής *νόμ*[ι]σμα ἕνα κ(αί) ὁ Τρωμάρχις κ(αί) ὁ Παντωλέο(ς) *νόμ*[ι]σμα ἕνα ἥμισυ κ(αί) ὁ *νομ*[ι]κός *νομίσματα* ὀχτώ . . . ἐτ[ελει]ώθη δέ]ὑ]πό χ[ε]ιρός καμο ῦ Ν[ι]κολάου τοῦ [ἱ]στ[ο]ριογράφου ἀπό χ[ώ]ρας Ρετζήτζα(ς) (μετά) τοῦ αὐταδέλφου κ(αί) μαθ(η)τοῦ μου Θεοδ[ώ]ρου: D. Feissel and A. Phillipidis-Braat, "Inventaires en vue d'un recueil des inscriptions historiques de Byzance. III. Inscriptions du Péloponnèse," *Travaux et mémoires* 9 (1985): 267–395, at 312–13. This article, plus another two related studies in the same series, provide an excellent overview of Byzantine inscriptions. They are: D. Feissel and J.-M. Spieser, "Inventaires en vue d'un recueil des inscriptions historiques de Byzance. II. Les inscriptions de Thessalonique. Supplément," *Travaux et mémoires* 7 (1979): 303–48; and J.-M. Spieser, "Inventaires en vue d'un recueil des inscriptions historiques de Byzance. I. Les Inscriptions de Thessalonique," *Travaux et mémoires* 5 (1973): 146–80. See also S. Kalopissi Verti, *Dedicatory Inscriptions*.

or book has been given to the Virgin," but this is a rare occurrence indeed.[26]

Although, as we have said, there is a surfeit of appropriate spiritual content in these inscriptions, the practical concerns that they manifest are somewhat surprising when seen in contrast to the donor portraits. The dominant theme of the portraits, when taken independently of any inscriptions, would seem to be their emphasis, to the exclusion of all else, on direct contact between human and deity as the gift is handed over. Yet the inscriptions shy away from any direct statement of that communication as would be contained in the phrase "I give these books to Thee." They concentrate instead on the hard, literal, empirical truths of the commission, the paying of money and physical construction of churches. In fact, to invert the situation, if we initially had only the inscriptions, and then discovered the portraits at a later date, they would probably come as something of a surprise.

This divergence between the text and the portraits relates strongly to recent discussions concerning word and image in Byzantine art. As much of this work has shown, text relating to an image is under no particular obligation to be an accurate reflection of that image; there are many different ways in which the two interact, often producing an effect that is greater than the sum of its parts.[27] Our contact portraits form a case in point of this phenomenon, and a little further on in this chapter we will suggest a specific reason for this divergence. For the moment, however, in terms of the realist-belief hypothesis that we are pursuing, we may rephrase our earlier set of questions in the following way: "What kind of belief is this which is fully aware that buildings and books are solid, practical and expensive, very much of this world, and yet considers that they can be really given to spiritual, holy figures?" The problem, in short, is one of the status of the belief concerning the interaction between the human and the divine, and it is to this subject that we turn next.

* * *

In the article "Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: A Comparison," Gerhard Ladner attempts a theorization of the realist-

[26] Titos Papamastorakis also notes the intense awareness of "things of this world" in dedicatory epigrams. See his "The Display of Accumulated Wealth," 42.

[27] The literature on this subject is large and growing. See for example the two volumes edited by L. James, *Art and Text in Byzantine Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), and, with A. Eastmond, *Icon and Word: The Power of Images in Byzantium* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), and by the same author (with R. Webb), "'To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places': Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium," *Art History* 14 (1991): 1–15; see also R. Nelson, "To Say and to See: Ekphrasis and Vision in Byzantium," in R. Nelson (ed.), *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143–68.

belief position, posing much the same question of the interlacing of the spiritual and the material that we have so far been discussing. Approaching the subject from the viewpoint of modern theories of structural linguistics, he draws primarily on the work of Roman Jakobson and the use made by Hayden White of Jakobson's concepts in the field of historiography.[28] Although we will ultimately reject the realist-belief position, an analysis of the limitations of Ladner's effort to account for it will take us far in our own efforts to arrive at an alternative reading of the nature of the belief that is at stake. Furthermore, we will follow his lead in pursuing our investigation by means of linguistic tropes.

Ladner invokes in particular Jakobson's distinction between the tropes of metaphor (the comparison of two different objects, as in "he was a lion in battle") and metonymy (the use of a part to refer to the whole or another part, as in "all hands on deck"). He finds that a fundamental difference exists between the medieval approach to symbolism, which he describes as being essentially metonymic in character, and the modern, which he sees as being metaphoric. Although metaphor operates by comparing items and finding equivalences between them, Ladner further characterizes it as working primarily on binary opposition and polarity, precisely in that two different items are compared. Metonymy, however, has "connotations of contiguity or contact, participation and hierarchy."[29] It is primarily unificatory in effect.

Ladner takes this metonymic functioning as being an important and underrated part of Christian symbolism, as it stresses participation rather than difference. His prime examples here are the sacraments, in particular the eucharist. "This is not so much a metaphorical as a metonymical symbolism, for sacramental symbolism is not merely one of similarity, but rather one of contact, of participation of man with Christ . . . The sacrament is altogether a special kind of symbol: it not only signifies, but also effects what it signifies, and in the case of eucharist even is what it signifies, namely Christ in his sacrifice."[30]

Ladner thus construes metonymy as being a special type of symbol, which by its very nature allows for a transformation of that symbol so that it comes to confound its own status of being merely symbolic, and

28 G. Ladner, "Medieval and Modern Understanding of Symbolism: A Comparison," *Speculum* 54, 2 (1979): 223–56; H. White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973); R. Jakobson, "The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles," in R. Jakobson and M. Halle, *The Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1956), 90–96.

29 Ladner, "Understanding of Symbolism," 229.

30 Ladner, "Understanding of Symbolism," 240.

includes within itself the physical, corporeal "reality" of what it refers to. This is of some importance for us, for it seems to address exactly the questions we have been asking. Icons, the eucharist – indeed, the referent act of donor portraits, the symbolic donation itself – might all be functioning within the metonymic mode, and thus could be constituting a belief in their own corporeal "reality" as they go about the business of signification.

Against this idea, however, a fundamental question must be raised that goes to the heart of the realist-belief proposition. The idea that emerges from Ladner's study concerns a notion of undifferentiated singlehood where matter and spirit mingle in unison. However, the case will be made that this conception is flawed. To be clear, this is not to be construed as an attack on Ladner's work in general, which is never anything less than extremely interesting. It is, rather, an attempt to reconsider a specific conception of presence of which he gives a particularly concise account.

In order to examine the topic further, let us turn to an area where the selfsame question of the interlacing of the spiritual with the material had been extensively examined: the debates around the iconoclast controversy of the seventh and eighth centuries. Although this discussion takes place some time before the majority of our images were done, this was also the period of the most detailed investigation of the theme, one in which the groundwork for all future consideration of the subject in Byzantium was laid. Strong homologies exist between the positions of iconophile authors and the understanding of contact portraits enabled by contemporary philosophers of language such as Nelson Goodman, making this a fertile area to explore. Included in this debate were discussions not only of icons, but the eucharist as well. The argument will be made that all these sites of transformative symbolism, contact portraits included, are closely interlinked, each providing a platform through which meaning is generated in the others.

Much of the dispute between iconophiles and iconoclasts over the issue of holy presence in icons concerned what each side considered to be the true nature of an image. Yet, for both parties, interestingly, the touchstone of this argument was not a visual picture, but the eucharist. For both, the eucharist was considered to "be" the true body and blood of Christ, in an absolute sense, and on this subject, at least, they were in complete agreement.[31] The true nature of an image was then defined in relation to this fundamental fact, and it was here that disagreement arose.

[31] St. Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, trans. C. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), 2.31–33; Nikephoros I, Patriarch of Constantinople, *Discours contre les iconoclastes*, trans. M.-J. Mondzain-Baudinet (Paris: Klincksieck, 1989), 2.2.3 and 19.

For inconoclasts, the form of total homology found in the eucharist, complete identity in every respect between image and prototype, symbol and referent, was absolutely necessary for an image to be an image proper.[32] Nothing less would do, and only the eucharist qualified on this score. It is the only true image and symbol. "Only this image [the eucharist] is true and this act of portraying sacred."[33]

The iconophile response to this assertion, in the form given by the Patriarch Nikephoros, is of great significance. For him, the eucharist is not an image at all, but is the real presence of Christ itself: "We do not say that the bread and the wine are the image or sign of [Christ's] body . . . but is the very body of the deified Christ." And he adds that Christ said to his disciples, "'Take this and eat my body,' he did not say, "the image of my body.'"[34] For Nikephoros, then, inherent in the concept of the image is already some notion of non-identity between the object and its referent.

This position is common to all the defenders of images: Nikephoros, Theodore of Stoudios, and John of Damascus, amongst many others. As Charles Barber stresses on numerous occasions in his study of iconophile thought, essential to the nature of an image is that it must be like its prototype in some ways, but not in all ways.[35] "An image is of like character with its prototype, but with a certain difference. It is not like its archetype in every way," says John.[36]

This point is extremely important for the iconophiles in response to the charge of idolatry leveled at them by the iconoclasts. Icon worship is not idolatry for the very reason that icons are not held to be identical in essence with the prototype, as idol worship would have it. An (icon) image is both like and unlike. It is not of the same essence, yet it can still partake of divinity.[37] In the terminology of the day, the image was said to be identical

[32] Nikephoros, *Discours contre les iconoclastes*, 1.15–16; Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, 1.10. On this subject see S. Gero, "The Eucharistic Doctrine of the Byzantine Iconoclasts and its Sources," *Byzantinische Zeitschrift* 68 (1975): 4–22; and J. Pelikan, "Images of the Invisible," in *The Christian Tradition,* vol. II: *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom, 600–1700* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), especially 93–94, 109–10.

[33] Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, 1.10.

[34] Nikephoros, *Discours contre les iconoclastes*, 2.3.

[35] Barber, *Figure and Likeness*, for example 18–19, 116–17, 129–30.

[36] John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images*, trans. D. Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 1.9. See also Nikephoros, *Discours contre les iconoclastes*, 1.28, and Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, 1.11.

[37] As for notes 35 and 36 above. See also Theodore the Studite, *On the Holy Icons*, 3.3.2.

with the *hypostasis* of Christ, but not the *ousia*.[38] Central to the concept of an image, then, is the idea of difference.

Given this theory as well, one readily understands Nikephoros's position on the eucharist. If the eucharist were an image in the iconophile sense, this would be to admit that the participation involved is not in fact complete, and that would effectively contradict a full understanding of the eucharist. For Nikephoros, then, the term "image" describes a very particular and specific relation between objects under comparison, such that they are both similar and dissimilar. If an object is too much like another, then it exceeds the limit of imagery, and the relationship becomes one of identity.

This insistence of the iconophiles on both identity and difference has profound implications for our discussion of the amalgamation of symbol and referent.[39] On the one hand, it is easy to be cynical of the careful distinctions drawn between icons and prototypes, *hypostasis* and *ousia*. These can readily be taken as nothing more than specious arguments to avoid the accusation of idolatry – or, indeed, as hair-splitting of no particular consequence. Further, the charge may also be laid that, aware as the educated sophisticates may have been of these distinctions, the public in general almost certainly was not. All of these would lead to the claim that the essential belief, below all the technical double-speak, is simply that the holy being is "in" the picture, and that is all that counts.

Against this, however, we may posit an alternative position. Far from being post-hoc rationalizing cover for a fundamental, simple belief in real presence, the distinction between *hypostasis* and *ousia* is an essential element in the generation of a rather different kind of belief concerning that real presence. The distinction actually functions to keep the items of symbol and referent, picture and person, supposedly united within the belief, very much apart, as separate categories of objects that would not, under any circumstances other than religious ones, be brought together. The distinction provides a strong sense of the difference of the items under consideration so that when the religion declares that they are actually combined, this appears as something extraordinary – a miracle – something, in fact, that only the religious field itself can achieve. For all that the holy figures are in the pictures, there is no sense that the same holy figures are absolutely identical with the pictures; in fact, the *hypostasis–ousia*

[38] The clearest account of these terms, and their relation to icon theory, is given in Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom.* In what follows, I have not examined the *hypostasis/ousia* distinction from the traditional, theological point of view, but have attempted to demonstrate how this distinction itself operates to structure broader fields of belief.

[39] On this topic see Barber, "From Transformation to Desire."

distinction serves to deny that explicitly. And it is this precisely – this denial – that underlies the holy presence in icons. For what becomes remarkable, once the denial has been insisted upon, is that holy figures, people with all the attributes which that charged category of being possesses, should in some literal sense come to have a real, shared presence with a picture of colored pigment and wood, through nothing other than the fact that they look like them. It is this that becomes the site of a religious transformation: effectively, a miracle. Simply through the relation of visual resemblance and imagery, two separate classes of object, whose difference is insisted upon by the very theology itself, are brought into a form of unity with each other by that same theology. It is through the feature of non-identity between items, structured in by the *hypostasis–ousia* distinction, that the occurrence of the holy presence in icons is rendered possible as a miraculous event.

The *hypostasis–ousia* distinction, then, is a way of defining the differences between items so that the similarity, when it does occur, is remarkable, a miracle. This supernatural transformation between strange, different objects appears as a special feature of the religion itself, one of the extraordinary events that it alone can bring into being. Part of what defines the religion is its ability to perform feats like this. The sense of difference, then, the oddity of the presence, is in fact crucial to the religious nature of the belief in icons.

This notion, of course, runs contrary to the view discussed earlier, where the unity of symbol and referent is taken as a simple, straightforward fact. As we see, however, that unity and participation is predicated on difference; there must be a profound sense of distinction between the items that are brought together, or else the unity would hardly be worth mentioning; indeed, it would not be “mystical” at all, merely a humdrum uniformity. And this is explicitly brought about through the technologies of image and prototype, *hypostasis* and *ousia*, or indeed, any other of the further complex, multitudinous distinctions drawn by iconophiles in defense of their practice.

What is more, this feature of a necessary consciousness of difference applies across the board, to all sites where religious symbols are transformed, where the spiritual infiltrates the material, such as the eucharist, activities of holy figures, and miracles in general. For in every one of these, which is properly about the mediation and interaction between the worlds of the natural and the supernatural, that unity is considered miraculous, marvelous, by the religion itself. And so long as it is considered remarkable that this participation should occur, then there must be some

presupposition that it is strange and odd, that in some sense the mingling of the worlds should not occur. Built into the grounding conception of these unificatory procedures then, of real presence, is a presupposition of the inherent difference and incommensurability of the worlds. The mingling, when it does happen, must require some special divine agency beyond the ordinary world of the natural in order to come about.

Thus, in contrast to the overall conception of the realist-belief hypothesis, which sees an unproblematic fusion of spiritual and material elements, we find full consciousness of difference in all cases. In fact, the fully unificatory would be entirely self-defeating for the religion in that it would collapse the distinction between the worlds. What is at stake is the very nexus of religious power, the control of the sites of infiltration of the spiritual into the material: in short, the miraculous. If it were considered ordinary (non-miraculous) that icons should have presence, or that blood were wine, then the special function that religion has in virtue of being situated at the juncture between the worlds, which is that of establishing propriety and regulation over the traffic between them, would be lost. The fully unificatory would simply remove those sites entirely.

In all these cases it is nothing less than the concept of the remarkable that keeps the worlds apart, and thus allows for their coming together to be seen as . . . remarkable. If the overt declaration of a miracle is of a meeting, and unity, then the subtext is that the worlds are really far apart, and that they should not be meeting. The task of structuring difference falls on those selfsame items that profess to obliterate it.

Yet, if this distinct marking of the difference between symbol and referent is implicit in the very concept of their unity, as it is for example in the eucharist, where does this leave the explicit articulation of that difference such as we find in icons, in terms of *hypostasis* and *ousia*? Is the icon argument not redundantly reiterating a point already structured in to its field of operation? On the contrary. The religious field has many ways of maintaining the structural integrity of the "miraculous," all of them highly functional, and it does this by means of the links that emerge between all the areas we have so far been discussing. We have seen Nikephoros and the iconophiles drawing a distinction between icons, which have partial presence, and the eucharist, which has full presence. This distinction effectively allows for the simultaneous functioning of two separate standards that operate across (rather than in harmony with) each other. The structure of a necessary difference between the worlds is maintained covertly through the idea of the eucharist (the wine is miraculously the blood, but also it is not the blood), yet cutting across this is another

overt framework, that of icons, under whose terms the identity achieved by the eucharist is in fact complete by comparison. Admitting that the picture has only partial presence gives extra validity to the claim of the completeness of that presence for the eucharist, but leaves intact the covert assertion that that complete presence is itself necessarily contentious (the wine is not the blood), by not addressing it. It thus allows the claim to full identity greater validity and conviction, all the while maintaining – as a backdrop, almost – the idea of necessary difference between the worlds, against which the miracle must work.

Unlike the realist-belief proposition considered above, where the belief in the identity and co-participation between symbol and referent is taken as a fact – an unproblematic given – we now see that that belief is anything but simple. Indeed, it can hardly be characterized as a "belief" in any unitary sense at all. Instead, it is complex and contradictory, in and of itself. The holy presence in icons, as we have seen, is intricately modulated and hedged and partially denied, just as it is partially asserted. And this modulation is itself rendered sensible through comparison with another case of presence, "complete" in the eucharist. Yet even here, the complexity and contradiction continues; the eucharist itself is declared "complete," and complete it is in relation to icons. But strangely enough, it excludes from that completeness the very aspect that is so powerfully affirmed in icons: visual resemblance. Denial of some sort is woven into the fabric of every assertion, but comparisons and cross-references keep the whole system afloat.[40] Real presence in a symbol, then, proliferates into a series of subcategories, all of which relate semiologically to each other, give each other meaning, and generate their own conviction. "Presence," effectively, structures a hierarchy of its own, providing classifications of varying degrees of spiritual–material integration, the crucial ciphers of religious life.

Given this alternative explanation of the belief in the symbol-referent dynamics under examination, we might return to metonymy and ask whether it might still not provide a viable accounting for the phenomena. On the one hand it is reasonable to declare that the part-part and part-whole operations of metonymy are integrative in a very general sense. This arises from the simple fact that whenever parts and wholes are under consideration, they cannot really be anything else, in that their relation to each other necessarily entails placement within a single conceptual unity, the whole.

[40] See Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, 107. See also 70: "[The symbol serves] as an index for selecting hypotheses which other indices corroborate."

But the crucial feature within metonymy – "forty sails appear on the horizon" – is that the reference must be to a readily acknowledged, preexistent "whole." "Sail" is readily identified with "ship." In order for metonymy to be meaningful, the step between the items under comparison must be an easy (in some ways, obvious) one to take, through their regular occurrence within the same non-controversially construed whole. Yet within the religious cases we have been looking at, the procedure is exactly the opposite. The progression from wine to blood or pictures to people is hardly an easy, obvious one to follow. In fact, this very connection is the one that the religion establishes as being "miraculous" – that is, extraordinary. The symbol and its referent do not participate in a preconstituted, preestablished unity, as does "sail" and "ship," or "hands" and "people" in "all hands on deck." Instead, the wine and the blood are features whose unity it is the task of the religion to constitute now. And moreover, that unity is constantly reiterated as being strange and peculiar, by being construed as miraculous.

Metonymy, then, is plainly not applicable to the present situation. It operates by manipulating preestablished conceptual unities, not by forging new, controversial, unities. To consider that unification as being generated by metonymy is to put the cart before the horse by accepting as a fait accompli the very unity that the religion itself says is not a fait acccompli, but a miracle.

Yet, if metonymy is not appropriate to this particular task, another trope, metaphor, provides a near-perfect fit with much that we have so far seen. An influential theorization of the operation of metaphor is provided by the analytic philosopher Nelson Goodman in his book *Languages of Art*.[41] Goodman stresses that items under comparison in a metaphor – a lamb for Christ, or Eve as Mary – do not function as single, static elements in a code, waiting to be translated univocally back into "what they really mean"; one cannot simply "replace" the lamb with Christ in any given situation. Rather, metaphor brings together the entire ranges of meanings, all the various connotations, of each of those items considered. The metaphor of Christ as a lamb sets up for consideration all the various properties of "lamb" that might be applicable to "Christ." Metaphor involves a wholesale reclassification of one item in terms of another. One must think about the full range of aspects and qualities of a lamb that could be said to characterize Christ as well. Certain properties are highlighted and emphasized, or new, fresh elements, which one had not

[41] N. Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1976).

noticed before, may suddenly appear. Metaphor thus provides for new ways of thinking about the items under consideration. Moreover, this reclassification is not an activity that will come to an end having been performed only once. It constantly stimulates new chains of thought, and provokes the discovery of different facets of the items being compared. The process need never come to an end.

Moreover, the “motor” that drives the process of constant comparison and discovery is in fact an active resistance to the similarities being discovered. Underlying all the likenesses and new meanings generated, there must be a strong sense of the separate, individual nature of the items being compared. It is intrinsic to the function of metaphor that each item retains its own distinct range of meanings even as it is forced into a new descriptive schema. “Metaphor requires attraction as well as resistance.”[42] If there is no resistance, the description will not be stimulating, will not provoke new ways of thinking. It is this constant oscillation between affirmation and the oddity of that affirmation that provides the cognitive force of a metaphor. The new way of thinking about the object reclassified will hold the attention firmly and provocatively only as long as there is a sense of the strangeness of the comparison. Without it, the metaphor falls dead. “Application of a term is metaphorical only if to some extent contra-indicated.”[43]

Many of the central points made by Goodman are explicated by Sperber as well.[44] He too focuses on the thought processes stimulated by a symbol, the new discoveries and insights it renders possible. His explanation for this also relates to the clash of meanings involved in a symbol. Symbols, in comparing two elements, are always literally false. To say that Christ is a lamb is manifestly untrue. But once the possibility of literal truth has been impeded, the symbolic process commences. One begins to search for a way to render the comparison, which is literally false, true. One seeks out those features, all the aspects and properties of the element being compared, which would allow the proposition to be true in some particular respect. The crucial point again here is that in order to maintain the activity of searching, there must be a firm sense of an incompatibility, the fact that Christ is not a lamb, so that the impossible work of finding a non-existent solution to the problem, which is thus restated time and time again, continues. Those similarities that are thrown up in the process of searching through all the various possibilities, the yield of the symbolic enterprise, are what Sperber calls “evocations.”

[42] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 69. [43] Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 69.
[44] Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*.

There is much in these accounts of metaphor that is useful for an understanding of the issues of religious symbolism we have been considering. Most obviously, these theories illustrate perfectly the cases of holy presence in icons, the eucharist, and other forms of miracles. Against the notion of unproblematized unity, the account insists on necessary differences that generate a sense of wonder at the unity achieved.

Here, as well, we find a solution to the problem posed earlier by donor inscriptions in relation to donor portraits. Donor portraits show a real giving between material and spiritual figures, but most donor inscriptions insist heavily on the practical materiality of money and buildings, and generally steer clear of statements of donations to holy figures. They thus seem to contradict each other. But it is only if each, portrait and inscription, is taken to be a statement expressive of the belief of the donor, that this contradiction appears. Donor portraits do not express a belief that the giving involved is real, as depicted, just as inscriptions do not express that the giving is not real. In fact, rather than regarding either as simply giving voice to some preconstituted, passively held belief, we should be looking at the way in which each of the elements is actively involved in the construction of a belief. Donor portraits assert that a dedication is like a giving to God, but negation is intrinsic to the assertion as well. The contradiction is already encoded within the portraits themselves, which show something manifestly impossible, and the inscriptions reinforce this negational process. Through their insistence on the pragmatic, material, literal truths of building and paying for a church, they function to assert the impossibility of a real giving to a spiritual figure. They are part of the necessary contradiction in the constitution of the belief in the giving to God.

These principles also provide an answer to the question of the status of belief in the giving to God represented in donor portraits. Contrary to our earlier hypothesis that posited that the giving was truly believed to be real, just as depicted, metaphor theory allows us to see that this is less than half of the story. The giving is not simply believed real at all. Rather, it is actively disbelieved, as it is believed.

But metaphor theory also allows us to be more specific about the nature of the belief in the giving, and the role of the portrait in constructing it. For the portrait is a metaphor itself, although a particularly complex one. Normally, in terms of metaphor, as we have seen, one action is "explained," described, in terms of another. This applies here as well; the dedication of a building is being explained, reclassified, as a giving to God. But in this case, the action that does the explaining and reclassifying (the giving to God) is itself already metaphoric, because literally impossible. It is

this second, embedded, metaphor, which is already one of the terms of comparison in the first metaphor, that the donor portrait is acting on as well. The donor portrait is not only comparing a dedication to a giving to God, but also comparing a giving to God to a literal, material giving between ordinary, mortal humans. It is only in relation to this ordinary giving that the trans-boundary giving represented in donor portraits itself makes sense. The donor portrait thus operates two activities of metaphoric transformation simultaneously. The giving to God depicted both actively reclassifies one activity and itself "passively" undergoes reclassification within the donor portrait.

However, these two layers of transformation are not of equal value. The donor portrait is set up as though its primary task concerns the act of reclassifying the dedication as a giving to God (first metaphor). But it is really in the second-tier metaphor, whose project is the rendering of sense and meaning to the giving to God by relating it to a literal, material giving, that the real work (and the real power) of the donor portrait lies. Yet the two metaphors are not functionally unrelated. In fact, the initial metaphor is itself pressed into service in the task of explicating the second. A dedication is like a giving to God, which is like an ordinary giving, because the dedication/giving to God fulfills certain conditions that align it with real giving. Once a church is built for and dedicated to a holy figure, the church belongs to that holy figure. She or he possesses it, it gets his or her name. The holy figure is even thought to reside in it, in some special sense. Books given to that church are ("really") given to that person. Special prayers said in the church will be addressed to that specific figure as well. All of these evocations, relating to webs of giving, fulfill some of the truth conditions of a literal giving. They allow one to concretize the notion of a real giving to God (by providing valid comparison with material givings). Once again, the donor portrait performs its sleight of hand. It reclassifies the building of a church as a giving to God, but, in doing this, simultaneously renders comprehensible the proposition that something material can be literally given to a holy figure. Indeed, the first reclassification activity depends for its force and impact entirely on the second.

Yet, as part of the religious belief generated in the process, the negational aspect of metaphor is in force as well. Other truth conditions of a real giving to God are, of course, denied. The definitional barrier between human and divine remains in force. No one literally gives a church to Christ. No one actually sees the scene represented in a donor portrait in non-painted reality. Within these negational currents, too, we find the

"materialist" donor inscriptions, as mentioned. They also function to assert the impossibility of a real giving to a spiritual figure by insisting on the pragmatic, mundane aspects. By not using the phrase "I have given this book/church to thee," they refuse to countenance the truth claims made by the portraits. The gap between what the images represent and what inscriptions generally say remains in force.

Yet helpful as metaphor theory is in elucidating these portraits, it does not fully account for the status of the religious belief involved. A religious metaphor has a different status to a "lay" metaphor. "He was a lion in battle" does not request from the hearer that the fighter be elided with a lion in the same transubstantiating way as "the wine is the blood." The demands made on believers to arrive at the full truth value of a religious symbol are different from those of a lay symbol. It is much to be doubted whether metaphor, or any symbol, can provide a precise explanation for the phenomenon of religious symbolism. Ladner sought the answer for religious transformation in metonymy, and metaphor has been helpful for us. Yet it is not anything specific to symbolism itself that accounts for those transformations. To search for the answer there is like asking what it is in the bread that turns it into the holy body. Rather, the answer lies in religion itself. Symbolism is not the cause of a religious transformation, but a result of it. It is not any particular symbolic functioning that asserts that the giving is real. Rather, it is simply the authority structure of the religious system itself, internalized so that it cannot be questioned, that guarantees the truth of the proposition, even as the real world cannot help but declare its falsity.[45] Within this gap, which only religion can bridge by its actions of miracles, religious belief is generated.

Religious symbols, then, have much in common with metaphor, but they are not reducible to it. The crucial difference between the two, the status of the belief in the coming together of symbol and referent, resides with the religion itself. Religion chooses its sites of symbolic transformation. In Orthodoxy, these sites are the eucharist, icons, and miracles of all sorts. Included here too are prayers and liturgical services, where again the natural and supernatural are brought into contact, and of course our portraits.

[45] See Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, 93–96, for more on this. See also P. Veyne, "Between Myth and History, or the Weakness of Greek Reason," *Diogenes* 113–14 (1987): 1–30; and J. P. Vernant, "Figuration de l'invisible et catégorie psychologique du double: le colossus," in *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs*, 2 vols. (Paris: F. Maspero, 1975), vol. II, 65–78. For a related analysis of religious belief see R. Gordon, "Reality, Evocation and Boundary in the Mysteries of Mithras," *Journal of Mithraic Studies* 3 (1980): 19–73.

We spoke earlier of the way in which donor portraits reclassify events in the world. Yet for all that they do this, they can also be approached from the angle suggested by the above discussion. The images certainly bear a relation to particular deeds of donation, however that donation is construed. However, if read by themselves simply as images, and not in their reference back to any "real" events, we see that as visual forms they too participate in the ongoing production and structuring of belief. In this respect, they form a real contribution to the economy of religious belief. This holds as much for donation as for non-donation portraits. The scenes represent as a truth something that must always be denied. The presence of an ordinary human before a holy figure, whether making a donation or not, is believed real only in the very specific sense that it requires a religious transformation to render it real. They are one of the privileged sites where religious belief is generated.

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At the end of the previous chapter, we said that the gift is something like a magic box that transforms the urgent desire of the donor to materially alter the course of events that will affect him or her, so that it becomes compatible with the principle of the autonomy of God.[46] In doing so, the gift allows for an interaction between supplicant and holy figure that would not otherwise have been possible. With the material covered in the current chapter, we now arrive at a deeper understanding of just what that interaction further comprises. For all that the gift allows a communication to pass, the relationship that is established is not a simple, stable entity with an easy contact between the protagonists. A scene such as that of Theodore Metochites does not declare or reflect a simple belief that the barrier between natural and supernatural has already been breached (Fig. 0.1). Rather, it poses the question of how that breach might happen, of what kind of an event that might be; and, in that process, it *produces* a new kind of contact across that barrier. The function of the gift is not to pull down the barrier, to obliterate the difference, but, precisely, to leave it in place. The function of the donor portrait is not to show the barrier being breached in any simple sense, but to generate the charged, laden, miraculous belief in that impossible event.

With these notions, we also reach a fuller understanding of the active role that the gift plays in structuring the mysterious relationship with divinity, and we see that it consists of two movements, compounded, as it were. The gift provides a solution to one conundrum, that of the clash

[46] See above Chapter 4, p. 193.

between human volition and the autonomy of God; but in the process it opens up another, that of the impossible meeting between natural and supernatural – or, better, the gift provides a solution to one conundrum that would have prevented any form of contact, *in order* to open up another, even larger, more extraordinary field of mystery. This field is one where the nature of that contact is revealed as both impossible and plausible, and where, again, the gift will play yet another role.

Above we said that the donor portrait is one site amongst many of religious transformation. Yet it should also be stressed that amongst these sites, the portraits have a special status. This is accorded by two overlapping factors: the personal and the visual. It is only here that someone can *see* themself, can find themself *mirrored* – in the strict sense of the term – at the very place where that transformation is taking place. But if the believer is thus placed at the center of the image, it is not to show what he or she believes; rather, it is to show the magnitude and gravity of the task that is faced by that believer to render the image real. If, as we said in the Introduction, the supplicant has climbed into the scene, once there, he or she is both the transformed and the transformer; that supplicant is the one the image calls on to transmute the image into truth. This is the world that the supplicant is both not part of and not not part of. This, too, is the generative paradox in which that supplicant is enmeshed, and from which his or her belief flows.

Postscript: The Problem of Terminology Again: Donor Portraits and Contact Portraits

At several stages in this book we have raised the topic of the two types of iconography that constitute the contact portrait: donation scenes, in which something concrete is offered, and those images in which the lay figure is simply shown in the presence of the holy figure, without offering anything. Let us return now to a reconsideration of each of the scene types in relation to the various issues raised in the book.

In the Introduction we considered what title should be given to the iconographic type of each scene. The donation form is easy to name, but the other is less so. To call it non-donation is accurate in one sense, but is problematic in that it defines the scene in terms of what it is not, as though it were not doing something that it should, or as if a crucial element were missing. It judges the scene by a standard that is perhaps not appropriate; indeed, it might well be that the scene is of an entirely different nature, one that has nothing to do with the first. Let us take a closer look at each scene type.

In the previous chapter we discussed the complex relation of the contact portraits to "reality." One of the early conclusions we reached was that it is not possible to connect something as precise as giving a book to a church to the specific iconography of donation. Rather, such images should be seen as reclassifying the act of patronage of a work as a donation to God.

One of the features of this argument is that it inverts a standard method of approaching images. Rather than presuming an event in the world – a commission – that is seeking representation, we should say that it is the representation that calls a set of events into being as those specific events. It is the representation in its role as active producer, not passive re-presenter, that converts what would otherwise be a perhaps nebulous set of activities – buying a building, conversing with painters – into a miraculous interaction with divinity.

Yet, if this is the case for donation portraits, what is the situation regarding the scenes where the supplicant is empty-handed? How do they deal with those broad events of commissioning a work that the

donation iconography acts upon? In these images the visual reference to those events is much less direct than it is in the true donor portraits. Within donation iconography, as we mentioned in the Introduction, the scene itself makes reference both to a material object that has been brought into being through patronage, in the form of a church model or a book, and to the ownership of that object, through the fact that it is represented in the hands of the patron. But the connection between a supplicant flinging himself or herself on the ground before a holy figure and the patronage of a work is much less direct. There is no real visual link established within the image to any of the material themes of patronage.

This does not mean to say, however, that the scenes bear no relation to patronage. On the one hand, they clearly make sense within that context, and should no doubt be seen as the end point of the process: the lay figure, almost always in a position of imploring supplication before the holy figure, can be understood as making visually manifest the same pious impulses that provoked him or her to undertake the task of sponsorship in the first place. But, unlike the true donor portrait, the non-donation scene does not go back and reconstrue any of those practical, patronage-related activities as a donation. It does not return to the physical scene of patronage and renarrativize it. Indeed, it may be said that the non-donation portraits pass up on the opportunity of reclassification.

This analysis has dramatic consequences for the interpretation of the scene, and for how we regard the difference between the two types of iconography. The true donor portrait, in converting patronage into a donation, raises the issue of the gift, of reciprocity and causality. But then, as we saw in Chapter 3, having gestured in these directions, it causes all of the phenomena to deviate from their normal outcomes, transforming them into something almost unrecognizable. It subverts the standard functioning of the gift, leaving in place only the structure of non-causal causality, soft causality.

For the non-donation iconography, however, none of this applies. These scenes do not even raise the issue of the gift, and therefore do not engage in any of the complex issues that follow in its wake. If donor portraits try to square the circle of causality and the autonomy of God, the non-donation scenes do not set off down this path. They leave unquestioned the notion of the autonomy of God, and do not burrow away at its foundations by forcing against it the incompatible issue of causality. Simply stated, such scenes are not donor portraits.

Yet, if not donor portraits, then what are they? As mentioned above, not only do such scenes not convert various activities involved with patronage

into a gift, there is also no visible link established to patronage in any form. These images thus distance themselves from the very subject of patronage; visually speaking, and unlike the true donor portraits, their main thematic is not patronage at all. With their lay figures always in an attitude of supplication and request, always in prayer, it would seem that their principal concern is no more than the co-presence of each of the figures in the scene, each belonging to a different world. They are the concrete visualizations of the much-sought-after (but impossible to achieve in reality) state of contact between human and divine that we discussed in the last chapter.

In comparison, then, it must be admitted that on many subjects the non-donation iconography has less to say than its more garrulous counterpart: for each topic that it brushes by, donor portraits come back and worry over it. If the theme is a request to God, donor portraits convert this into an issue of causality. If there is a connection to patronage, the donor portrait turns the act of patronage into a gift. The net that the non-donation scene casts catches fewer subjects.

Does this mean, however, that the non-donation portraits are simply a weaker, vaguer version of the donor portrait, slower to get to grips with the core issues? Perhaps the best way to answer this is to return to our comments at the end of the fifth chapter, where we considered the scenes independently of any relation they may bear to reality or patronage. As we now see, non-donation portraits pull in this direction of interpretation anyway. Distancing themselves from the topics of patronage, they appear to demand of themselves that they be interpreted primarily in terms of the contact envisaged between lay and holy. Yet, having said this, we may ask what donor portraits themselves have to say on this topic. What if, for a moment, we wrench ourselves away from all the other complex subjects that we have seen this iconography broaching, and consider the scenes just from the point of view of transworld contact?

A non-donation scene, in simply showing the juxtaposition of the two figures, demonstrates contact, instantiates it. Donation iconography, however, true to its form as the loquacious sibling, does not allow contact to stand by itself. Rather, the representation of giving contains within its very syntax connotations of a specific interaction and interchange between agents, beyond the simple co-presence of the two. A giving is always a giving to. There is thus a further allusion to contact, an elaboration of the issue, a declaration that contact is its theme. This idea is also enhanced by the representation of the object of the gift itself in the scene. It is as though the object – the book or the church – is a meditation on the fundamentally interstitial, difficult-to-pin-down concept of the in-

between, of the gap between two individuals from different realms of being, and how that gap is bridged. It is as if an attempt has been made to somehow materialize, concretize, the mysterious interaction between the figures through the physical object itself.

Yet, by comparison, is there not something that might even be called courageous in the non-donation scenes in that they do not make use of any of these devices and strategies, as we see, for example, with the monk Sabbas in ms. Dionysiou 65 (Fig. 3.10)? The mystery, the uncertainty, the strangeness of the encounter is simply allowed to resonate, without any further efforts to arc over the divide between the figures. When taken in combination with the fact that they remove themselves from the happenstance of patronage, of individual circumstances, this resonance becomes even more acute. For what we have is a scene that transcends the contingent in an effort to contemplate a universal, yet a universal still predicated on the individual: what is the relationship of the single worshiper with God, considered alone, in and of itself, without the impetus of the gift, without any of the other trappings we have seen? In this respect, even though the non-donation scenes appear to have less to say than the donor portraits, there is perhaps something in their relative reticence to speak that is perhaps deeper, closer to the originary movement that brings religion into being. An argument might well be made that these are amongst the most profound scenes in the entire range of Byzantine art.

To end, however, at the same point where we began, on the question of names. What to call these scenes? To label them non-donations, as we have seen, is problematic. The term contact portraits would be perfect, were it not for the fact that donor portraits, too, are contact portraits, and there is no other term that I have been able to find that applies exclusively to these images, and not to donor portraits as well. Yet, having said this, a partial solution does suggest itself. Rather than seeing these images as being deficient versions of donor portraits, as the term non-donation suggests, we should see donor portraits themselves as augmented contact portraits. This establishes what the two iconographies have in common, and then allows the donation scene to be regarded as attempting to enhance that base theme.

In an almost-ideal world, then, the overall category should be called contact portraits, as we have been doing throughout this book. Those specific scenes that show no more than the supplicant in the presence of the holy figure should also go by that name. Those scenes that show a donation should continue to be called donor portraits. This would leave open an ambiguity in the term contact portrait between the overall

group and one specific type of scene, but it would make clear that donor portraits are, at heart, contact portraits. It would also have the advantage over the term donor portrait as it has long been used to refer to both types of scenes together, that it would not falsely include what we now see to be images that are not donor portraits. Contact portraits would thus be subdivided into those that represent a gift and those that do not. We might still find ourselves occasionally using the term “non-donation contact portrait”; however, at least that phrase is not false, whereas the term “non-donation donor portrait,” which we would be forced to use if conventional naming of these scenes were to continue, makes no sense whatsoever. In some of our images, the gift is an important feature. In all of them, however, it is the connection between figures that counts. Contact is the key.

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Abbreviations

PG:	*Patrologia cursus completus. Series graeca*. Edited by J. P. Migne. 167 vols. Paris: Garnier, 1857–66.
Concile de Florence:	*Documents relatifs au Concile de Florence*, ed. L. Petit in *Patrologia Orientalis*, ed. R. Graffin and F. Nau. Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1927, vol. XV.

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